SHADOW SLAVE
II
DEMON OF CHANGE

SHADOW SLAVE

Volume-2

Demon of Change

Chapter-96: Exile

"Wake up, Sunless! Your nightmare is…"

"Shut the hell up!"

Trying to remain in the blissful embrace of sleep, Sunny hissed through his teeth and stubbornly closed his eyes tighter. He was warm and comfortable under the blanket, on his own bed, where all the problems of the world seemed less serious and dire.

For a moment, there was silence.

'That's better…'

"Wake up, Sunless! Your…"

'Goddammit!'

Thrusting one arm from under the blanket, Sunny summoned one of his Memories. Immediately, a triangular leaf-shaped throwing dagger appeared in his hand, only to be thrown blindly at the source of the irritating voice. Missing its mark, the kunai clinked against the stone wall and fell to the floor.

However, the voice did fall silent.

Sunny sighed. It was already too late. He was awake.

Far in the distance, the waves were starting to crash against the city wall. The night was coming, so it was time to get up.

Opening his eyes, Sunny sat up and looked around.

His room was beautiful and spacious. The stone walls were engraved with intricate patterns, creating an atmosphere of sanctity and elegance. The furniture was made out of pale polished wood, with

several mismatched pieces that Sunny had scavenged from different places himself.

The room had no windows, however, there were light wells cunningly hidden here and there. Sadly, the ingenious system of mirrors that was supposed to bathe the hidden chamber in sunlight was long destroyed, leaving only darkness inside.

Sunny didn't mind. In fact, this was one of the features of his secret lair that he enjoyed the most.

Darkness was his best friend.

Yawning, he stood up and rubbed his face to chase away the last remnants of sleep. His long, dirty hair was getting in the way, so he moved it back.

'Let's make some breakfast.'

But first things first…

Sunny moved his hand, pulling on the invisible string that connected his wrist to the ring-shaped pommel of the kunai. The throwing dagger jumped into the air and landed on his palm. This was a trick that had taken Sunny quite some time to master: in the beginning, he almost lost a couple of fingers while trying to learn how to control the flying blade.

Walking over to a wall empty of engravings, he used the kunai to scratch a small line into the stone. All around it, there were dozens and dozens of similar lines, grouped neatly into sets of five.

It had already been four months since Sunny came to this loathsome, godforsaken city.

Many things had happened during that time.

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Cassie's vision turned out to be true. Far in the west, they indeed found a vast, ruined city surrounded by tall walls, with monsters wandering its narrow streets. And in the center of the city, there was

a hill with a magnificent castle standing on its top.

Miraculously, the castle was full of people. However, they weren't Awakened, as the three of them had hoped. Instead, they were, each and every one of them, mere Sleepers.

Because they were no Gateway in the castle.

Hundreds of humans — those who had managed to survive the lethal hellscape of the Forgotten Shore due to their strength or luck — were stuck there with no hope of ever returning to the real world. It was nothing but a graveyard of hope.

Remembering his first days in the castle, Sunny couldn't help but laugh out loud. Oh, what a fool he had been. So full of hope and newfound faith in humanity… where's that faith now, huh?

Laughing hysterically, he bent over and slapped his knees.

"Oh, that's funny! Good one, Sunny. What do you think about that, eh buddy?"

The shadow didn't respond, staring at him with reproach. Its silence only made Sunny laugh louder. He just couldn't stop.

To be honest, he had gone a little bit insane some time ago. Probably around his third week of living alone in the city. He was more or less alright after leaving the castle due to that unfortunate falling out with… well, it didn't matter.

The point was that on his third week, that damn bastard of a knight had almost disemboweled him, leaving Sunny no choice but to crawl away while using his own two hands to stop his intestines from falling out. After finding his way to a secluded ditch and lying there for a few days, too weak to move and simply waiting to die, with not a soul around to help him, Sunny wasn't quite the same.

'Good times…'

Anyway, he survived.

Dismissing the kunai, Sunny walked over to a table that he had

scavenged from the ruins of a library and glanced at the grey rock that was lying in its center.

No matter how you looked at it, it was just an ordinary rock. However, as soon as Sunny's gaze fell on it, the rock spoke:

"Wake up, Sunless! Your nightmare is over!"

That rock was, in fact, one of his most valuable Memories. In all ways except for one, it was indeed just a rock… which was already useful enough. There were a lot of things that someone as devious as Sunny could accomplish with the help of a rock. However, this particular rock was also capable of parroting different sounds, which made it simply priceless.

Right now, it was parroting Sunny's own voice.

"Wake up…"

'You vile thing!'

Struggling with the irrational desire to turn the Parrot Rock into dust, Sunny dismissed it and removed a piece of cloth from the table. Beneath it, a few strips of monster meat lay on a silver platter.

He had hunted this monster himself, which was not an easy task in these parts. In fact, as far as Sunny knew, he was one of the very few people capable of hunting in the city alone. The reason for this was that most of the Nightmare Creatures populating it were of the Fallen rank, with only a handful of weaker ones hiding here and there.

No one was crazy enough to hunt the Fallen monsters. Instead, large hunting parties used experienced guides to avoid these powerful creatures while searching for easier prey.

But to Sunny, singling out stray Awakened monsters were comparatively easy. He hunted at night, using deep shadows to make himself nothing short of invisible. If he didn't want to fight a Fallen abomination, he didn't have to.

Most of the time…

In any case, he never went hungry.

Sunny grinned and said in a deeply satisfied tone:

"Ah, life is good…"

Chapter-97: Hunter's Dream

Life, indeed, was good. In fact, Sunny would even go so far as to say that, currently, it was wonderful.

One would expect that being stuck in a cursed city located in the middle of an actual hell, surrounded by nothing but ruins and horrifying monsters, was not really the best way to live your life. But to him, this was somewhat of a paradise.

To his surprise, Sunny had found out that this type of existence suited him pretty well. He had no obligations, no need to worry about the future and, most importantly, was not required to interact with other humans.

Humans always made things hard and complicated. He was sick of them.

Being on your own was much better. He didn't have to pretend to be someone else, force himself to behave differently from how he wanted to, and strain his mind trying to understand people's convoluted feelings.

For the first time in his life, Sunny could simply be himself.

Turns out, his true self was very easy to please. He had no shortage of interesting things to do, explore, and kill. His life was very entertaining and comfortable, all things considered.

It was at least way better than his pathetic existence in the outskirts, back in the real world.

The key to this harmonious feeling was very simple. It was to have no hope.

Sunny discovered that hope was the true enemy of peace. It was the

most vile and poisonous thing in the universe. If there was even a glimmer of hope to return home, he would have been desperate, full of anxiety, and probably in the middle of some insane disaster right now.

Like he had always been before.

But without hope, things were simple and pleasant. He really couldn't wish for more.

"Keep telling yourself this crap. You might really believe it."

Sunny grinned.

"What is there to believe? It's the truth!"

The shadow silently shook its head, long accustomed to his crazy tirades. Lately, Sunny had been talking with himself a lot, having long arguments that sometimes descended into screaming matches. It was a good way to pass the time.

…A bit later, he emerged from his secret chamber. Sunny's lair was situated in the upper part of a ruined cathedral, the entrance hidden behind a tall statue of some unknown goddess. There was a small balcony that allowed him to observe the grand hall of the temple over the goddess's shoulder, concealed from sight by the strands of her stone hair.

The balcony was really high above the floor, making it impossible for any creature to climb on it by accident. Falling down would certainly kill a normal human.

Sunny had discovered the hidden room while spying on the bastard that had gutted him. He had entered the cathedral through the hole in its roof and landed on one of the wide support beams, then walked across and accidentally noticed the small balcony.

That's how he and the bastard had become neighbors. The bastard was, in fact, the guardian of this place. He patrolled the grand hall, killing anyone who dared to come inside. Sunny saw plenty of powerful Nightmare Creatures fall to his sword, cleaved apart without much effort.

Of course, the bastard was a Nightmare Creature of considerable power himself.

Sunny was pretty sure that he was at least a devil.

Sharing the cathedral with a devil was very convenient. Sunny could sleep easy knowing that no monster would be able to reach the inner sanctum alive. Of course, he had to be careful to never be seen by his murderous roommate.

On the upside, he could observe the devil as much as he wanted, waiting for a chance to exact his revenge. Sunny was hellbent on killing the damn knight, eventually. The bastard had to die.

But before that, Sunny had to become stronger. Much, much stronger.

Walking across the beams of the cathedral, he approached the hole in the roof and climbed through it.

Outside, the night was already reigning over the world.

It was time to hunt.

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A skeletal, hunched figure was slowly walking along the narrow street of the cursed city. The creature had long arms that ended with vicious claws and a deformed head with a wide mouth full of razor-sharp fangs.

Even with its back bent, the monster was at least two meters tall. It was dressed in a torn shroud that was once white, but had long ago turned brown from the dried blood.

This was Sunny's prey.

The creature, which was called a Blood Fiend, was among the weakest dwellers of the cursed city. It was merely an awakened monster, barely intelligent and comparatively easy to kill.

Of course, nothing was really easy to kill here. After all, each and every human on the Forgotten Shore was just a dormant beast.

Despite the fact that they shared the same rank and class, Blood Fiends were less formidable than Carapace Centurions in terms of strength and speed. However, that was only until they smelled blood, which sent them into a murderous frenzy. In that state, these fiends were a true menace.

'Pathetic,' Sunny thought, stalking the Nightmare Creature from the shadows.

He had killed a few of these monsters in the past and had a great time each time… well, except for this one encounter where he had accidentally scratched himself on a sharp stone. That was not fun at all.

'Time to die, you ugly freak!'

The Blood Fiend was just about to turn the corner when a sudden sound attracted his attention. With unnatural speed, the monster turned around and fell on all fours, his sensitive ears picking up the slightest rustle. Then, he took a few careful steps forward and stopped at a certain spot.

In front of the fiend, an ordinary-looking rock was lying on the ground.

A second later, the rock suddenly spoke:

"Behind you," it said politely.

The creature froze for a moment, then turned around with lightning-fast speed.

Something whistled in the air, and the upper part of the Blood Fiend's body separated from the lower. Still refusing to die, the monster reached out with its long arms.

"Too slow!"

Sunny slashed with the Midnight Shard, severing one of the arms at the elbow. Continuing the motion, he took a quick step forward and performed another strike, this time piercing the creature's skull. The tip of the tachi entered through one of its eyes and exited through the

back of the head.

All of it took less than a second. By the time both parts of the monster fell to the ground, Sunny had already retrieved his sword.

Looking up with expectation, he smiled and waited.

"Come on, say it!"

As if answering his call, the Spell whispered:

[You have slain an awakened monster, Blood Fiend.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

Sunny grinned.

"Ah, thank you kindly. You're so sweet."

The runes shimmered as they appeared in the air in front of him. Looking down, he read:

Shadow Fragments: [398/1000].

Just two fragments away from four hundred. These days, he was progressing at a very respectable speed. In the beginning, back when he had not known the city and the creatures that populated it, Sunny was lucky to get a few fragments in a week.

He had also been much more prone to ending up bloodied and one step away from death.

But now, things were slowly changing. He couldn't even remember the last time he felt compelled to say goodbye to life.

'Ah, you idiot. You just had to go and think that out loud, huh?'

Just as he finished that thought, a distant sound of footsteps reached his ears.

Chapter-98: Uninvited Guests

Sunny looked grimly at the corpse of the Blood Fiend, then in the direction of the approaching footsteps.

Who was crazy enough to remain in this cursed city during the night? Only a complete lunatic would do something that stupid. All the sane people were long gone from the streets, not to mention that very few were willing to enter the ruins to begin with.

A dark shadow flowed from the tip of the Midnight Shard's blade. Coalescing on the ground, it stared at him with sarcasm.

Sunny stared back.

"What?"

The shadow shook its head and didn't answer, forcing him to turn away with a confused shrug.

"Whatever. Ah, it seems we have guests. What to do, what to do? The place is a mess!"

Looking around, Sunny sighed, glanced at the corpse of the monster once again, and summoned the kunai. The smart thing to do was to run away. Who knew what exactly was producing those footsteps? Maybe it was a group of people, maybe it was a Nightmare Creature with a lot of feet. It was better not to find out.

But he wasn't done with the hunt yet. He still had to get his trophies…

"Go take a look."

Sending the shadow away, Sunny kneeled and began to cut the tough flesh of the dead creature. Without the enhancing effect of the

shadow, slicing the Blood Fiend apart was not as easy. However, he still managed to find the first soul shard rather quickly. One more to go…

Meanwhile, the shadow had discovered the uninvited visitors. Six humans were cautiously walking along the narrow path in the stone ruins, lighting their way with a ghostly blue lantern.

They were all rugged men, wearing mismatched suits of armor and armed to the teeth. Their eyes were cold and hard.

Sunny raised his eyebrows.

"My, oh my. They really are people. What is a bunch of Gunlaug's thugs doing outside the castle walls in the middle of the night?"

Gunlaug was the owner of the castle and the self-proclaimed king of this odious place. Every Sleeper on the Forgotten Shore was forced to either serve him or pay him tribute. Even still, the latter usually didn't live long.

Dismissing the Midnight Shard and the Parrot Rock, Sunny concentrated on searching for the second soul shard. He wanted to be gone from the street before these gentlemen arrived.

But the circle of blue light was approaching too fast…

Finally catching a glimpse of the glowing crystal, Sunny grabbed it and hurriedly hid it in his armor. Then he dropped the kunai on the ground and took several steps back.

But it was too late. They had already seen him.

"Be careful! There's a monster!"

As Sunny was backing away, several weapons were aimed in his direction. Feeling that things were about to get out of control, he cleared his throat and said in a trembling voice:

"Oh, oh! Please don't hurt me! I'm a human!"

Saying this, he mentally looked himself over.

With his ghostly pale skin and dirty hair, his ragged armor covered in layers of dried and fresh blood, Sunny was indeed easy to mistake for a Nightmare Creature. He wasn't really paying much attention to personal hygiene and appearances these days.

Hopefully, speaking in a human language would prove his identity. Raising his hands to show that he wasn't armed, Sunny took another step back.

The six Sleepers were really surprised to see another human this far away from the walls of the castle, especially at night. Using their momentary confusion, he cautiously moved even further away.

"Don't move!"

Finally able to comprehend the situation, one of the castle inhabitants hissed a threatening command. Sunny obediently froze, careful not to make any sudden movements.

The unexpected guests proceeded to come closer, glancing at the corpse of the Blood Fiend as they walked past it. One of them was taller and better equipped than the rest. Piercing Sunny with a menacing gaze, he approached him and stopped one or two steps away.

The man was older than Sunny by a few years. He was tall and muscular, with a patchy beard covering the lower part of his face and a mean look in his watery blue eyes. From his demeanor and Memories, it was easy to tell that the leader of the group had spent no less than three years on the Forgotten Shore. He had experience and time to grow stronger than most Sleepers here.

However, it was also apparent that he wasn't really high up in the ranks of Gunlaug's army. Otherwise, his equipment would have been much more impressive.

Still, the heavy battle-axe that was resting on the man's shoulder looked really sharp. It would take him only a second to bring that thing down on Sunny's head…

"Who are you?! What the hell are you doing here?!"

Sunny blinked a couple of times, then gulped and answered carefully:

"Uh… I'm Sunless. I live here."

The leader of the hunting party — if it was one — narrowed his eyes.

"What… live here? Do you take me a fool, boy?! No one can survive in the city!"

The other Sleepers were of the same opinion — except for one, who looked at Sunny with doubt. Frowning, he took a step forward and said in an uncertain tone:

"Wait, chief. He might be telling truth. I heard that there's a crazy kid who lives in the ruins alone."

The taller man scowled.

"How is that possible?"

His subordinate glanced at Sunny and shrugged.

"From what I heard, his Aspect allows the boy to hide in the shadows really well. I guess he crawls around like a rat and picks up the leftovers after the monsters are done eating. I don't really know, but someone was talking about him back in the castle. I thought they were just telling tales."

Sunny frowned. Crazy, boy, rat… why did everyone feel compelled to call him names?

Meanwhile, the helpful Sleeper thought for a bit and added:

"I think he came into town with that bitch, Changing Star."

Sunny's frown turned into a scowl. Looking down, he whispered to his shadow:

"These guys are really very rude, don't you think?"

Of course, his whisper was easily heard by everyone around. The Sleepers stared at him in confusion.

Sunny tilted his head a little and opened his eyes wide, as if shocked by something.

"What? You think I should kill them all? I mean… isn't it a little bit over the top? I should give them a chance to apologize, at least."

The leader of the hunting party took a step forward and said in a low, growling voice:

"What are you mumbling about, rat?"

Sunny looked at him with scorn and dissatisfaction.

"Hey, I was talking to my buddy. Can you please not interrupt?"

A wide, dangerous smile appeared on the tall man's face. With a sigh, Sunny turned to him and said:

"Alright, if you insist. You guys have offended my dearest friend, Nephis of the Immortal Flame clan. She and I are very, very close. So I'll give you one chance to apologize for calling her a… well, you know. If you don't, say goodbye to your lives."

The older man stared at him for several seconds, then suddenly raised his head and laughed.

"Oh, that's a good one! Have you heard, guys? This tiny weasel will give us a chance. How generous! Should we be generous too, huh? What do you say?

The boy is sick in the head, after all."

The other five Sleepers were not sharing his enthusiasm. One of them smiled darkly and said:

"No, chief. I think we should just kill him. Put the poor fool out of his misery, you know."

The Sleeper that had corroborated Sunny's story before, meanwhile, was frowning again.

"Wait, guys… he's one of Changing Star's people, remember? The

original group, I mean. They had survived two entire months in the Labyrinth on their own. We shouldn't underestimate th…"

However, the leader interrupted him with a contemptuous scoff.

"I heard that Saint Nephis carried two useless sacks of shit on her back all the way to the castle. The bitch is fond of taking care of weaklings, right? That delicious little friend of hers is blind, for god's sake! I'm sure that this one is no better."

Then, he turned to Sunny and grinned.

"I tell you what, rat. Give us all your Memories, and we'll be generous enough to let you live. "

If an Awakened died, their Memories disappeared with them. The only way to get the Memories was to make the owner transfer them of their own free will. However, whether or not that will was affected by coercion or torture didn't really matter. At least not to people like these.

Sunny blinked.

"So you're not going to apologize?"

The tall man grinned.

"I think not."

Sunny sighed.

"Oh well. So you want my Memories, eh? I have a few. Let me think… uh… how about this one?"

Lowering one hand, he summoned the Parrot Rock. It immediately appeared on his palm, looking as boring and ordinary as always.

The leader of the hunting party frowned, not taking his eyes away from Sunny's face. Despite his crude exterior, he was paranoid and careful. Years of experience had taught him to never lower his guard.

A moment later, the rock spoke:

"Behind you!"

That was the most basic of tricks…

The tall man grinned, still looking Sunny in the eyes.

"Do you really think that I would fall for…"

However, before he was done talking, the blade of the kunai hit him from behind, penetrating the back of the man's skull and killing him on the spot.

Chapter-99: Pursuit

Sunny had dropped the throwing dagger near the monster's body in advance and then took all those steps back to make this exact situation possible. As soon as the Parrot Rock spoke, he pulled on the invisible string, sending the kunai flying back in his direction. The tall bastard didn't just happen to be in its path, either.

[You have slain…]

The leader of the hunting party really should have listened to that rock.

[... shadow grows stronger.]

Before the Sleepers even had time to react, Sunny was already moving. The shadow had been wrapped around his body a long time ago, making him that much faster. Summoning the Midnight Shard, he fluidly slashed at the nearest enemy, severing the man's arm at the elbow.

The blade struck right between the vambrace and the couter of his enchanted plate armor.

To Sunny, these people were slow and clumsy, their power level and technique severely lacking. He had already been more experienced than them after the harrowing journey through the crimson labyrinth, learning how to wield the sword in combat from Changing Star herself.

The three months he had spent hunting and surviving alone in the cursed city only made the gap that much wider. Despite looking like easy prey, Sunny was anything but.

However, he wasn't foolish enough to challenge all five of them. People might have been weaker than Nightmare Creatures, but what

made them really dangerous was their unpredictability. Each Aspect was unique, arming humans with a formidable arsenal of inexplicable Abilities.

Facing something you couldn't understand was the surest way to end up dead.

With his advantage of surprise gone, Sunny decided that it was time to retreat.

Turning around, he jumped out of the circle of light and ran. It was really hard to pursue someone who could see in the dark on these narrow streets, so there was a real chance of escaping unscathed.

However, the kunai was still attached to Sunny's wrist. Sliding out of the dead leader's skull, it fell to the ground and clinked loudly against the stones, then jumped a few meters away and hit the pavement again, creating more noise.

"Get the bastard! He killed the chief!"

Following the sound of metal striking against stone, the Sleepers lunged forward, following in Sunny's footsteps.

'What a persistent bunch.'

Even the guy who had lost his arm was on his heels, either having a way to stop the bleeding or simply unwilling to let the attacker escape even if it cost him his own life.

This part of the city was Sunny's hunting ground. He knew every nook and cranny of these streets like his own five fingers. Honestly, he was unsure what these guys were even thinking. If it wasn't for him carefully choosing the path, they would have ended up disturbing some terrifying Fallen creature and becoming its dinner a long time ago.

Something wasn't quite right here. Gunlaug's people might have been thugs, but they were experienced and accomplished hunters. They feared the city and knew how to behave while outside the castle walls.

Otherwise, all of them would have been dead a long time ago.

Come to think of that, it was extremely rare to see them going anywhere near the city at night.

Were these fools even real hunters? If not, what were they up to?

Sunny briefly considered leaving one of them alive to interrogate later, but then decided against it. To be honest, he wasn't really curious. Human business had long ago lost its allure in his eyes.

He had much more interesting things to do.

Finally reaching his goal, Sunny lingered on the steps, pretending to be in a panic.

The five Sleepers were once again able to lay eyes on their victim. The scrawny kid was hesitating in front of the entrance to a large ruined building, fear clearly written on his dirty, pale face. It seemed as though he didn't know where to go, afraid to run into a dead end.

Noticing them, he flinched and dove into the building with desperation in his eyes.

"You have nowhere to run now, rat!" hissed the man who had lost his hand to Sunny's blade.

Full of killing intent, the Sleepers followed the crazy young man into the building.

…However, once they got inside, they saw no sign of the scared kid. The only thing they saw was a simple rock lying on the floor.

As the one-armed man belatedly realized that something was wrong, the rock said in an ominous tone:

"... say goodbye to your lives!"

A second later, a massive silhouette stepped out of the darkness.

The man's eyes widened as the figure of a regal knight clad in a menacing black armor reflected in them.

The creature was more than two meters tall, his gothic armor forged from a lusterless, anthracite steel. Every part of the armor was decorated with intricate engravings that told a tale so horrifying that anyone would go insane from looking at them for too long.

The helmet of the Black Knight was crowned with curved horns that might have been wings once. In the narrow fissure of his visor, two ghastly red flames were burning with indescribable menace.

Before the Sleeper had time to react, a heavy black blade fell from above, effortlessly severing his body from head to groin, cutting through flesh, bone and armor with similar ease.

A torrent of blood surged to the floor.

…Climbing onto one of the supporting beams of the ruined cathedral, Sunny sat down and looked at the slaughter that was happening below.

'Huh. The bastard is in a really bad mood today. Well, have fun!'

Some time later, as the echoes of screams began to fade away, he sighed and counted the corpses lying on the distant floor.

It was hard to count, because most of them were in pieces.

Making sure that not one of the pursuers got away alive, Sunny frowned and shook his head.

'Six people… their disappearance won't go unnoticed. Especially if they were really up to no good. Huh... why do I feel like I have just gotten myself in trouble?'

Chapter-100: Clear Conscience

The Black Knight remained motionless for several minutes, silently observing the corpses of his enemies. Drops of blood fell from the blade of his fearsome greatsword, gathering into a puddle beneath his feet. The thoughts of the cruel creature were a mystery. To be honest, Sunny wasn't even sure that this unstoppable mountain of murderous black steel was sentient.

In that regard, the monstrous inhabitants of the cursed city were a bit strange.

Usually, Nightmare Creatures of higher classes possessed a perverse form of intelligence, which was often comparable to that of humans, and sometimes even surpassed it. However, that rule did not apply to every monster in this eerie place.

From Sunny's observations, the dwellers of the ruined city could be roughly divided into two groups. The first group consisted of various creatures that came here from outside the wall, be it from the Labyrinth or from the depths of the dark sea. These abominable things more or less followed the unnatural laws of the Spell that every Awakened was familiar with.

The second group was different. These creatures, he suspected, were either created from the remains of the ancient residents of the city or, creepily, had actually been them once. The wraiths, as he called them, were much more unfathomable and dangerous. Their powers and behavior refused to abide by any sort of sense or logic.

The Black Knight was one of these sinister revenants. That's why Sunny had trouble predicting his actions.

Most of the time, the regal devil was content simply patrolling the grand hall of the ruined cathedral and killing anything that dared to come inside.

Just like he had killed those poor fools.

With a sigh, Sunny lay down on top of the support beam and, not paying any attention to the deadly height of his improvised resting spot, closed his eyes. He wanted to take a breath before continuing with his nightly errands.

Soon, the sound of heavy footsteps informed him that the bastard had resumed his neverending patrol.

'Good riddance.'

Despite the fact that nothing was disturbing his peace anymore, Sunny still felt strangely restless. His inner voice was in the mood to chat.

'Uh, Sunny. Aren't you forgetting something?'

He frowned. What was there to forget? He was just catching his breath before going out again. He also had to wait for the right moment to scavenge through the possessions of these dead hunters…

'You just killed six people. Don't you feel guilty?'

Sunny was a little startled by this question. Curious, he listened to his emotions and came to the conclusion that no, he did not feel guilty at all.

This was his third time killing a human being. Granted, the first time happened inside a Nightmare, where people were supposed to be simple illusions. However, Sunny wasn't sure that he believed in this theory. The old slaver's anguish had felt awfully real to be just a figment of his imagination.

The second time… well, he didn't want to think about that. That happened in the castle, anyway, and that part of his life was over.

The third time was the cleanest of them all. Those thugs were going to rob and kill him, anyway. Sunny had seen through their intentions long before pulling on the invisible string and sending their leader into the cold embrace of death.

He could have tried to run away, but… they were very rude. If the thugs had insulted just him, Sunny might have tried to end the confrontation without bloodshed. However, they insulted Nephis. Bastards deserved to die.

Despite the fact that his relationship with Changing Star had become strained, he still cared about her a great deal. Leaving the castle did not mean that he had forgotten their friendship. It's just that… there were more reasons to leave than to stay.

With a sigh, Sunny summoned the beautiful bottle made out of patterned blue glass. This was the farewell gift that Cassie had given him before their parting. He cherished this Memory very much.

Bringing the bottle to his lips, Sunny took several sips of cold, delicious water and opened his eyes.

He didn't want to rest anymore. Better to get moving…

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Before venturing out again, Sunny returned to his room and walked over to a large iron chest that was standing in one of its corners. Exerting some strength, he lifted the heavy lid and admired his treasure pile.

Inside the chest, more than a hundred beautiful soul shards were glowing softly in the dark. The sight of them always lifted Sunny's mood.

Despite the fact that he himself had no use for the soul shards, they were still a valuable resource. Here on the Forgotten Shore, shards were a form of currency among the Sleepers. A hundred of them was an unimaginable amount.

After a lifetime of being a pauper, Sunny was finally rich!

"Money, I have so much money…"

If a person wanted to live inside the castle walls, they had to pay a tribute of one soul shard every week. Those who could not afford it were forced to remain outside, living in a makeshift settlement just

beyond the gates, which was often attacked by the monsters. Even so, they had to pay for food or go out and hunt themselves, which more often than not led to their deaths.

With how much Sunny had gathered in these three months, he would have been able to live in the comfort of the castle for years… if he wanted to. Which, of course, he did not. Why would he pay for accommodations when he already had a palace of his own?

One with no noisy neighbors and a fearsome guardian protecting the premises, no less.

Putting two new soul shards in the chest, Sunny glanced at his dragon hoard one last time and closed the lid with a satisfied smile.

Perhaps it was time to visit the castle again and buy a few things… no, no. He had already bought everything he needed the last time. Spending too many shards would make people doubt that he was as pathetic as everyone thought he was.

Of all the Sleepers in the castle, only three people knew that he was not just good at hiding in the shadows and avoiding danger. They were Nephis, Cassie… and Caster.

That damn bastard...

Chapter-101: Turf War

Caster had been lucky enough to enter the Dream Realm near the city and arrive at the castle much earlier than the three of them. By the time Sunny, Nephis and Cassie had found their way to the human settlement, he was already in good standing there.

Despite the fact that there were a lot of opportunities for a talented Legacy to rise through the ranks of Gunlaug's army, he had nevertheless decided to remain independent and eventually joined the Changing Star's cohort, drastically raising their combat strength and reputation.

Looking back, that was when all of Sunny's problems had really started.

"That's right, it was all his fault, not mine. Yeah, definitely!"

Grinding his teeth, Sunny kicked the heavy chest and cursed under his breath. Then, acting as if nothing had happened, he smiled brightly and left the hidden chamber once again.

Down below, things were getting interesting. Attracted by the smell of blood, several monsters tried to enter the ruined cathedral to feast on the fresh corpses. However, the Black Knight was as full of wrath as ever. Just as Sunny climbed onto the support beams, he was finishing off a large creature that looked like a praying mantis made of human skin.

Initially, Sunny planned to take a look at the material possessions left behind by the five unfortunate thugs, but the sight of the ferocious battle made him change his mind. He would have to do it later.

Besides, his shadow had already looked through the bloody remains and came to the conclusion that there was nothing really valuable among the dismembered corpses.

Not wasting any more time, Sunny escaped through the roof of the cathedral and retraced his steps to the place where he had fought the Blood Fiend.

The body of the hunting party's leader was still there. Of course, his Memories had long disappeared, leaving the bearded man dressed only in rags. The heavy battle-axe was gone, too.

Sunny sighed.

"That's why killing people is not worth it."

His shadow covered its face with a hand and shook its head dejectedly, trying to express that his wording was nothing short of unfortunate. Sunny frowned.

"What? It's not!"

And for him, it was doubly so.

When one Awakened killed another, they received a considerable portion of the enemy's soul essence without having to shatter their soul shard. Sunny, however, was not an ordinary Awakened. His Aspect was based on consuming shadow fragments instead.

That meant that even if his enemy had absorbed hundreds of souls shards in the past, Sunny would only receive the number of shadow fragments matching their rank and class, just like he would after slaying a Nightmare Creature. Since all Sleepers were mere dormant beasts, in this case, the number was… one.

"Just one fragment away from four hundred," Sunny said, a bit disheartened.

All that work for nothing…

Some small, rational piece of his mind was actually relieved that killing humans was not very lucrative. Otherwise, in his state… no, he wouldn't. Surely.

"Ah? Wouldn't what?"

Sunny blinked a couple of times, waiting for his inner voice to answer. However, it was strangely silent. Shrugging, he bent down and searched the dead man's body, hoping to find something of value.

However, he was left disappointed. There was no pouch full of soul shards as he had imagined. All Sunny found was a strange piece of fabric that had been secretively tucked away into the tall thug's shirt.

Looking at the fabric, he noticed crude shapes drawn on it with ink. Some shapes looked strangely familiar.

"Is that… a map?"

Indeed, it was a primitive map. The shapes he recognized were the various landmarks located in the neighboring parts of the cursed city. Sunny knew many of them by heart, and had even explored a few in the past.

"A treasure map?"

Suddenly, the strange timing of the hunting party's arrival and their lack of experience made perfect sense. They weren't actually hunters. Instead, they were a bunch of fools who had been swindled by some smart person back at the castle into buying a fake treasure map.

At least that was the most likely possibility.

However…

"But what if it's real?"

Sunny blinked, looking at the map with a mix of distaste and avarice. He couldn't decide whether he should try and follow it or throw it away.

…Luckily, his thought process was interrupted by a thunderous crash.

One of the buildings not far from where he was standing suddenly collapsed, filling the street with a cloud of dust and flying debris. A massive shape flew through the air and heavily crashed against another wall, causing an avalanche of stones to fall down.

The creature tried to stand up, but then twitched and grew still, spilling rivers of fetid blood all over the pavement. It was unmistakably dead.

Sunny quickly hid the map in his armor and dove into the shadows, trying to understand what was happening. Somewhere near, furious roars and the sound of steel clashing against steel could be heard, growing closer with each second.

Strangely, there were no human voices.

"A battle between Nightmare Creatures?"

Such things were not rare in the cursed city, but to Sunny's knowledge, there were very few things capable of challenging the current masters of this street and the adjacent square.

These creatures were not the most powerful among the inhabitants of the city, but due to their unique characteristics, Sunny tried to avoid them like the plague. He saw several monsters much more powerful than anything he would be willing to take on ending up sliced and diced into tiny pieces on that square.

However, none of them was able to give the protectors of the square as much trouble as they were having right now, at least judging by the desperate sounds of the battle.

Intrigued, Sunny decided to take a look.

Hidden in the shadows, he climbed up the tall wall of an ancient building and soon arrived on its roof. Watching his footing, Sunny walked forward until he reached the opposite edge of the building.

From there, he could see the wide square in all its dark glory.

In the middle of the square, a moving statue was fighting against several hulking monsters.

Chapter-102: Stone Saint

On a dark square surrounded by ruins of once-magnificent buildings, a vicious battle was coming to an end. The remains of its solemn protectors were lying on the cold cobblestones, ruthlessly shattered into pieces.

Sunny blinked in shock.

'They actually lost.'

He was really astonished. The living statues that used to guard the square were a very tough bunch. As far as Nightmare Creatures of the cursed city went, they weren't the most formidable in terms of size and physical might. However, their strange bodies were extremely durable and capable of withstanding truly devastating amounts of damage.

Aside from that, the stalwart stone warriors were also disciplined, proficient in the use of weapons and utterly deadly. They were able to perfectly coordinate their movements, using strategy and tactics to silently overwhelm opponents whose power far surpassed their own. Countless monsters fell to their blades.

That's why Sunny had always avoided getting into a confrontation with these weird creatures. Even though they weren't Fallen by rank, the stone revenants represented a threat that was enough to make him wary.

However, now the ownership of the square was about to change hands.

The bodies of the previous masters lay shattered to pieces. In death, they looked just like broken statues. Even their metal armor and weapons had turned to stone after the wielders were destroyed.

There were five or six of these stone piles scattered around the square, while the attackers seemed to have lost only three of their numbers — including the massive monster that had been sent crashing through a building earlier. Each body towered above the dark cobblestones like a small hill.

The invaders were of a type of the Nightmare Creature that Sunny had never seen before. These new menacing monsters looked like giant spiders with bodies covered in thick plates of wrought iron. They moved with terrifying speed and force, sending cracks running through the cobblestones with each step.

There were currently two of them left on the square, circling around the lone surviving stone warrior.

The last of the living statues seemed to be a female. Compared to the spiders, she was almost comically small in stature, standing no taller than Sunny himself. The graceful stone creature was armed with a sword and a round shield, wearing a plate armor that covered most of her body, leaving only the eyes exposed.

Or, rather, two rubies burning with crimson flames that these creatures had instead of eyes.

Her armor and weapons were black in color, forged from some unknown and incredibly heavy stonelike alloy. Of course, in reality, they were made out of the same stone as their wielder. However, the dark force that had turned the granite body of this Nightmare Creature into the strange approximation of flesh had also turned the stone armor into metal.

Currently, the last of the living statues was standing with her shield raised, the blade of the sword resting on its rim. Her head was lowered, ruby eyes silently following the movements of the two spider monsters.

Sunny didn't know for sure, but he suspected that these spiders were both fallen beasts. In any case, the stone woman was doomed. Her enemies were just toying with her, savoring the helplessness of their victim before finishing the job.

He didn't really care. In fact, he was waiting for the show! Watching Nightmare Creatures slaughter each other was one of his favorite pastimes, and the best thing about it was that it didn't matter who won.

'Come on, get her!'

However, in the next moment, he was surprised. In a strange turn of events, the stone monster lunged at the spiders first. Calmly striking her sword against the rim of the shield twice, she dashed forward with grim determination.

The spider she was aiming at was a second too late to react. However, due to its superior physical form, it was still able to meet the sudden onslaught with a vicious strike of its own. One of its legs shot forward, threatening to shatter the stone body of the attacking living statue into tiny pieces.

The smaller creature deflected the blow with her sword and bashed the spider with the round shield, putting all of her weight and inhuman strength into the strike.

Sunny blinked as the massive body of the Fallen beast was thrown back and toppled over.

The black sword immediately lashed out, sending a shockwave through the spider's guts. A rain of strikes fell on the iron surface of the monster's abdomen, filling the square with the clangor of metal. The stone warrior attacked with savage ferocity, using both the sword and the shield to inflict as much damage as possible in a short amount of time.

Just as the iron plate protecting the soft innards of the monster cracked, the second beast joined the fray. The following bloodbath was nothing short of horrifying.

Despite the fact that the spiders were much faster and stronger, the steadfast stone wraith kept up with them for a while. Her indomitable will and ruthless resolve were enough to give the fearsome creatures pause. Moving with the deadly precision of a bloodthirsty killing machine, the living statue completely disregarded

self-preservation in favor of making her enemies suffer.

It seemed as though she was determined to take them to the grave with her.

Soon, the terrible wounds on her body accumulated, making the stone creature look like a vandalized piece of macabre art. However, the spiders were no better: their fetid blood was spilling everywhere, painting the whole square red. Severed limbs and shards of cracked iron littered the ground, mixing with the shattered remains of the fallen stone warriors.

Finally, one of the spiders fell heavily to the ground and twitched, drawing its last breath. The remaining beast lunged at the staggered stone monster, its countless eyes burning with fury.

The round black shield rose one last time and then flew aside, torn away along with the right arm of the stalwart living statue. However, almost at the same time, the blade of her sword pierced through the massive beast's skull, ending its life just a moment before breaking apart and turning to stone.

Sunny shook his head. What an impressive sight! A lowly Awakened creature slaying two Fallen beasts… Midnight Shard would have liked that fierce last stand a lot.

Come to think of it, this was nothing short of inconceivable. However, the graceful stone warrior paid dearly for performing the bloody miracle.

Staggering once again, she fell heavily to the ground, clearly done for.

The battle for the ownership of the dark square was over.

Nobody won.

Chapter-103: Coup de Grace

As the dust settled, Sunny abandoned his hiding spot on the roof of one of the buildings surrounding the square and jumped down. Avoiding the puddles of fetid blood, he walked among the corpses littering the ground and approached the dying stone monster.

The Nightmare Creature was lying on her back, her body battered and broken. From up close, Sunny was able to see it better.

The black armor of the strange monster was slowly turning to stone. In its gaps, he could see her slightly lighter skin. It was smooth like polished granite and dark grey in color. Streams of ruby dust was flowing from the terrible wounds, looking almost like blood.

Two crimson gems that served her as eyes slowly moved, focusing on Sunny. There was no particular expression in them, just tired stillness. The flames that used to burn inside were slowly dimming.

The statuesque creature stared at him without making a sound. In fact, Sunny wasn't sure that these monsters were even capable of producing sounds. Throughout the whole fight, she had remained eerily silent.

He sighed.

"Life is not fair, huh?"

With these words, he summoned the Midnight Shard and thrust it through the visor of the dying creature's helm. Even at the death's door, the stonelike flesh of the living statue proved to be extremely tough. However, he put enough strength into his strike, not wishing to make the poor thing suffer more than necessary.

He was always glad to kill a Nightmare Creature, but this one deserved a quick death. To be honest, he was very impressed by the

small stone warrior's desperate last stand.

"They didn't know who they were messing with. But you showed them…"

At that moment, the familiar voice of the Spell resounded in the darkness:

[You have slain an awakened monster, Stone Saint.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

Sunny smiled.

'That's four shadow fragments. Finally! Four hundred and three…'

However, in the next second, he forgot what he was thinking about. Because the Spell wasn't done talking.

Whispering into his ear, it slowly said:

[You have received an Echo: Stone Saint.]

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Sunny's eyes opened wide.

Did he hear it right?

An Echo? He had finally received another Echo?!

Cautiously looking around, Sunny lowered his voice and said to the shadow:

"You heard it too, right?"

The shadow stared at Sunny in exasperation, then gestured at its mouth, lowered its hands and didn't say anything.

He smiled.

"Exactly! That's what the Spell said!"

Humming a song, he paced back and forth for some time, then suddenly flinched.

"Oh, right. I should get out of here. Now that the stone people are gone, who knows what kind of horrors will try to make this square their nest."

He made a move to leave, but then stopped and looked at the scene of slaughter with avarice.

"However… I really should get some mementos first…"

It's not every day that you stumble upon that many dead Nightmare Creatures before the carrion eaters arrive to feast on the corpses. This was a chance he won't get any time soon…

Sunny hesitated for a few seconds, trying to decide which monsters to approach first. The spiders were obviously much stronger. If they were really of the Fallen rank, their soul shards would be incredibly valuable.

However, buying anything with a bunch of Ascended soul shards would be very suspicious. Plus, it would take a while to find the crystals inside the massive bodies of the giant beasts.

The living statues were of the lower rank, but their shattered remains were easy to search. The other inhabitants of the cursed city could arrive at any minute. So…

With a deep sigh, Sunny ran to the nearest pile of shattered stones and kneeled beside it, hoping to notice the gleam of the soul shards as soon as possible.

…He was barely done with the second dead statue when a sudden noise made him stop. Knowing that greed had doomed a lot of people to their deaths, Sunny suppressed the desire to linger here to the last possible moment and quickly dashed away, putting the last crystal he had managed to find inside his armor on the run.

Summoning the kunai, he threw it into the air and then pulled on the invisible string, making the dagger spin around a stone column. As soon as the string coiled itself around the column, he jumped and

made the string contract, sending him flying up.

Just like the golden rope, the invisible string that connected the kunai to his wrist was incredibly sturdy and capable of changing its length at will, which allowed Sunny to use the throwing dagger as an improvised grappling hook from time to time.

Using the top of the stone column to jump even higher, he grabbed onto the cracks in the wall of one of the ruined buildings and quickly climbed up. By the time he reached the roof, the noises produced by the approaching creature were already loud enough to make him shiver.

Whatever that thing was, Sunny didn't want to find out. The sound it produced while moving made him think of a giant snake… one with countless mouths, each hissing the notes of a strange, maddening tune.

Luckily, he left the wide square just in time to never meet that abomination.

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By the time Sunny had returned to the ruined cathedral, the night was already coming to the end. The eastern horizon was growing lighter, and the sound of the black waves crushing against the city wall was growing restless.

Walking across the support beams stretching above the grand hall, he caught the glimpse of the marching Black Knight and sighed.

One day… he was going to kill the bastard on some glorious day.

But not this day.

Today, he had other things to do.

Reaching the safety of his hidden lair, Sunny put the soul shards into his treasure chest and then sat down on a magnificent wooden chair.

There was an excited smile on his face.

It was finally time to find out what was the difference between a normal Echo and one transformed into a Shadow.

Chapter-104: Soul Arsenal

Not wasting any more time, Sunny dove into his Soul Sea.

Despite his changed mental state, it was as calm as always. The silent expanse of still water stretched into the empty distance, with the Shadow Core hovering above like a dark star. Tiny spheres of light floated in the air around it, reflecting on the surface of the tranquil sea.

The silent shadows were still there, standing motionless at the edge of darkness. Compared to before, their ranks had swelled. Monsters of all shapes and sizes were among them now, making Sunny's collection of slain enemies look increasingly impressive. Walking past them, he glanced at one or another from time to time, recalling the thrilling battles with a mix of dread and pride.

This was his personal museum, a dark monument to all his sins.

"Wait… sins? Why sins?"

Just at that moment, Sunny stumbled and stopped. Not too far away from him, a gaunt shadow stood among the menagerie of terrifying creatures, silently staring at him with empty eyes.

That shadow once belonged to a young man, not much older than Sunny himself. He had lived in the ramshackle settlement beyond the castle's gates, struggling to survive like everybody else. Before… before…

Sunny looked away.

"Don't you look at me like that. It was your own fault, fool. You shouldn't have asked me all those questions!"

Out of the three people he had murdered with his own hands, this

kill was the only one that made Sunny feel something. Because it wasn't done in the heat of the battle or to settle a personal score. This one… this one was done in cold blood.

It was why he had to leave the castle — among other things.

Sunny grimaced.

"I said stop looking at me! Just stay dead and don't bother me with your nonsense!"

Huffing angrily, he turned away. Soon, he walked past the shadows of the Blood Fiend, the hunting party's leader, and the deadly Stone Saint.

Glancing at the statuesque figure of the stone monster, Sunny forgot all about the gaunt shadow and smiled. He was here to take a look at her Echo, after all.

The prospect of having another Echo under his command was already very exciting. The loyal and strangely personable scavenger had been of great help to Sunny in the past, tremendously increasing his combat performance. After all, despite having a Divine Aspect and a uniquely powerful Ability, Sunny was still just a Dreamer, one whole rank below the Echo.

The scavenger, however, was merely a beast… while the Stone Saint was a monster. Her power was comparable to that of the ferocious carapace centurions, far surpassing anything that Sunny could ever hope to achieve in this cursed place. The strange nature of the steadfast living statue made her even more formidable.

Having a servant like that would make many impossible things possible. However, Sunny wanted even more. He was waiting to see what miracle his Aspect was going to perform, hoping that the results would surpass his wildest expectations.

Soon, he was standing under the black sun of his Shadow Core, observing the spheres of light that represented his Memories.

There were nine of them now.

The ones that he actually used were the Puppeteer's Shroud, the Midnight Shard, the Prowling Thorn, the Ordinary Rock, and the Endless Spring.

Savoring the anticipation, Sunny summoned each of them one by one and read the glowing runes surrounding the Memories.

He had gotten the heavy kunai after defeating a peculiar creature that resembled a monstrous armored porcupine. The rain of jagged bone quills had left several holes in Sunny's body, but the reward was well worth it.

Memory: [Prowling Thorn].

Memory Rank: Awakened.

Memory Tier: II.

Memory Type: Weapon.

Memory Description: [This flying dagger is as unpredictable and fickle as the affection of a young beauty, but, perhaps, not as deadly.]

Memory Enchantments: [Rose of Betrayal].

Enchantment Description: [The Prowling Thorn is connected to its wielder by an invisible string. This string is strong but mercurial — just like the treacherous bond of sentimental attachment.]

After reading this description for the first time, Sunny couldn't help but wonder if the Spell had been scorned by a lover once. The runes practically exuded bitterness.

Next on the list was his most dangerous Memory, the talking rock.

Memory: [Ordinary Rock].

Memory Rank: Awakened.

Memory Tier: I.

Memory Type: Tool.

Memory Description: [Just an ordinary rock.]

Memory Enchantments: [Not Really].

Enchantment Description: [The word is mightier than the sword. The rock is mightier than the word.]

The funny thing was that the Ordinary Rock, which was capable of repeating various sounds, had fallen into the hands of a person who was unable to tell lies. It was now the most honest Memory in two whole worlds.

…It had also made Sunny think twice before opening his mouth. Sometimes.

The last Memory he decided to take a look at was, perhaps, the most precious to him. It was the beautiful glass bottle that Cassie had given Sunny as a farewell gift.

Memory: [Endless Spring].

Memory Rank: Dormant.

Memory Tier: IV.

Memory Type: Tool.

Memory Description: [A lovesick devil had once imprisoned a mighty river in this fragile glass bottle. It was his gift it to a beautiful desert spirit.]

Memory Enchantments: [Gift of Water].

Enchantment Description: [This bottle contains enough water to make flowers bloom in the desolate heart of the most lifeless of deserts].

This one was sort of romantic. It seemed as though the Spell was all over the place when coming up with these descriptions, to the point where Sunny couldn't even tell if it was being serious.

With a sigh, he dismissed the sphere of light containing the Endless

Spring and glanced up.

The other four of his Memories were not very useful. They were an incredibly heavy tower shield, a suit of armor that was worse than the Puppeteer's Shroud in every regard, a glass eye capable of producing bright beams of harmless red light, and the obnoxiously loud silver bell — the first Memory he had ever gotten.

The remaining three had been awarded to him for killing comparatively weak monsters on the streets of the cursed city. He was hoping to trade them for something more suitable during his next visit to the castle, whenever that might be.

Forgetting about the Memories, Sunny finally focused his attention on the brightest sphere of light that was floating in the dark emptiness above his head

The one containing his new Echo.

He willed it to descend and watched as the sphere glided down, softly touching the surface of dark water a few moments later. It slowly dimmed, revealing the stone figure hidden within.

Here in the dark silence of the Soul Sea, the Stone Saint looked just like a statue. She was approximately as tall as Sunny, looking miniature in comparison to the rest of the Nightmare Creatures he had to face on the Forgotten Shore.

She was also uniquely human-like in appearance. If not for the dark grey hue and the stonelike nature of her granite skin, Sunny might have even mistaken the strange monster for a Sleeper. Provided, he couldn't see much of her body behind the graceful dark armor.

The nature of these strange creatures remained a mystery.

Chapter-105: Living Stone

Previously, Sunny had considered the living statues to be just that, monuments brought to life by evil spirits. There were a lot of revenants like that walking the streets of the cursed city.

Take the Black Knight, for example — Sunny was almost sure that the bastard was actually just a suit of armor with a vengeful wraith imprisoned within it. He had no proof that there was an actual body in that moving steel fortress, at least.

However, after watching the Stone Saint die right before his eyes, he wasn't so sure that she and the Black Knight were the same anymore. There certainly were similarities… even the design of their armors was somewhat similar, as though one had originated from the other. But the stone warrior's armor seemed much more… ancient.

And then there was the ruby dust that flowed from the stone creature's wounds instead of blood. Since when did statues have blood? It was almost like these strange creatures were designed to possess their own weird form of life. Come think about it, the stone warriors resembled artificial beings brought to life by some dark magic much more than they resembled undead creatures.

'Mysteries, mysteries, mysteries all around!'

Perhaps the runes describing the Stone Saint would provide him with some answers.

The Echo, meanwhile, was coming to life. Two magenta flames ignited in her gemstone eyes. The stone of her armor suddenly gleamed with subtle metal shine, the smooth surface of her granite skin turned slightly less rigid. Silently turning her head, the Saint gazed at Sunny through the narrow split of her helmet's visor.

"Let's see…"

He concentrated on the runes.

Echo: Stone Saint.

Echo Rank: Awakened.

Echo Class: Monster.

Echo Attributes: [Battle Master], [Stalwart], [Mark of Divinity].

Sunny blinked. Mark of Divinity? That was the same as his original Attribute! What business did a Nightmare Creature have walking around with the traces of divinity left in its evil, corrupted soul?

And what with these other Attributes…

Battle Master Attribute Description: [Born on the battlefield, the Stone Saint is proficient in all forms of combat.]

Stalwart Attribute Description: [The Stone Saint is highly resistant to all forms of damage, as well as being fully immune to mind and soul attacks.]

Bewildered, Sunny shook his head. No wonder these silent stone warriors were so deadly. They were literally a bunch of killing machines created to last as long and deal as much damage as possible on the battlefield.

But who had created them?

Leaving the Attributes alone, he lowered his gaze and read the next line of runes:

Echo Description: [Deep in the cavernous halls of his dark domain, the last child of the -unknown- had created them from stone to quell the fire burning in his resentful heart. However, that fire only grew hotter. Designed to bring peace, they were instead born into an endless war.]

Huh… the Unknown again. Or rather, their children. It seemed like his theory was correct. The Stone Saint was either an artificial being or a descendant of one. In any case, that was before she was

corrupted by… well. Whatever it was that had corrupted all the Nightmare Creatures, and especially those in the cursed city.

Now even gods wouldn't be able to describe what exactly she was.

Not that it mattered. A monster was a monster.

Sunny was more interested in the fact that the traces of divinity that the stone warrior bore had to have come from their original creator, who was at least partially one of the Unknown. Which meant that the Unknown, indeed, were closely related to the gods and to divinity itself.

Just like mysterious Weaver.

Looking away from the runes, Sunny studied the motionless Echo with his altered eyes. What he saw made him smile darkly.

Just like the Memories, the true essence of the Echo was weaved from the countless diamond strings that formed an infinitely complex pattern. Only in its case, the pattern was even more elaborate, dwarfing anything that Sunny had previously seen.

Two embers were burning inside the Stone Saint's body, serving as anchors for the endless strings. One of them was situated in the place where her heart should have been, the other in the lower part of her abdomen.

Sunny closed one eye and looked more closely. And there, behind the shining pattern of the diamond strings, he noticed another, much more primitive and crude system of adamantine threads. They pierced the stone flesh of the Echo, resembling a human nervous system.

These strings were also seemingly made from diamond, but they were much less ethereal. In fact, they were entirely corporeal. Sunny frowned.

'Makes sense… that makes sense. Wait, how does it make sense?'

The Memories and the Echoes were created by the Spell. They were artificial. The Stone Saint, too, was artificial, but in a much more

mundane sense. She was made by a child of the Unknown, just like her Echo was made by the Spell.

Which meant what? That the technique that had been used to create the Stone Saint was eerily similar to the technique that the Spell used, although it did look extremely primitive in comparison.

Could that mean that the Spell itself had come from the Unknown?

Sunny grimaced and shook his head. No, no. Although it was a sound theory, there was too little information to actually consider it substantiated or even remotely believable. He needed to find out more, learn more, uncover more before even beginning to understand the true story that connected the Spell, the gods, the Unknown, and his own life into one nightmarish tapestry.

But there would be time for it later.

Right now, he had something equally as interesting right within his grasp.

Glancing one last time at the graceful stone monster, Sunny gulped and licked his lips. Then, he said timidly:

"Let's… let's do this."

Taking a step forward, he hesitated and then carefully put his hand on the breastplate of the Stone Saint's armor, right across from the place where the main nexus of her Spell Weave was situated.

To his surprise, the breastplate felt like stone and was warm to the touch. It was as though a furious crimson flame was burning inside the Nightmare Creature's chest.

'Huh.'

As soon as Sunny touched the Echo, a new string of runes appeared in the air in front of him.

[Transform Echo into a Shadow?]

He hesitated, once again afraid to make the choice. What was he

going to do if the process made the Stone Saint weaker, or even useless?

Trying not to think of this possibility, Sunny sighed and forced himself to say:

"Yes!"

An imperceptible change happened to the Soul Sea, as though a gust of wind suddenly appeared out of nowhere. The tranquil dark water seemed to simultaneously stay still and move restlessly. Then, a sudden pressure came from somewhere above.

Raising his head, Sunny saw two dark beams descending from the depths of the Shadow Core. One of them fell on the Echo, while the other landed on one of the silent shadows that stood motionlessly behind his back, as though connecting them together

Bathed in the dark light, the shadow of the dead Stone Saint slowly dissolved into it.

And then the Echo began to change…

Chapter-106: Creating a Monster

Under Sunny's watchful eyes, the Echo began to change.

The light falling from the Shadow Core seemed to seep into the flesh of the stone creature, making it shine with dark radiance. Wisps of shadowy fog emanated from beneath her impervious plate armor, slowly merging with it. It looked as though the Stone Saint was engulfed in ghostly black flame, being remade by it.

What little color there was on her body was washed away and replaced with nothing but darkness. Only two crimson fires burning in her ruby eyes remained, slightly changing their hue and becoming more menacing.

Of course, all these changes were happening on the surface. If not for the traumatic transformation that Sunny had gone through to inherit a part of Weaver's forbidden lineage, this would have been all he saw.

However, with his eyes altered by the agony of consuming the drop of divine blood, he was able to see much more.

Beneath the surface, the essence of the Echo was being changed as well, in a way much more fundamental than its outer appearance.

The shining embers that served as anchors for the weave of diamond strings had lost their radiance, becoming as transparent and empty as the Shadow Core itself. The diamond strings were gone, replaced by a sea of darkness. That darkness had a form, a shape that perfectly followed the lines of the Stone Saint's body.

It was as though a living shadow was now inhabiting it, usurping the role that had been played by the pattern of the sorcerous strings once.

Although similar in appearance to the original Echo, this new creature was a completely different type of existence. Sunny had never seen anything like it before.

It was created by his Aspect, after all.

The process of transformation, meanwhile, was coming to the end. The ray of dark light cast by the Shadow Core was disappearing, its reflection drowning in the calm water of the silent sea. The black flames were already fully absorbed by the stonelike armor of the Saint, gone with the dark radiance of her smooth granite skin.

Sunny observed the Stone Saint. Clad in the lusterless black armor, with two ruby flames burning in the deep shadows of the visor, she looked like an incarnation of pure darkness, a noble demon sent to wage war against heaven from the depths of hell. What changed the most, however, was her presence.

Before, the Echo felt like an empty shell, a magical tool rather than an actual being. Now, however, there were hints of mysterious will in her crimson eyes, a subtle sense there was a nascent spark of sentience burning somewhere deep within her lightless soul. Or whatever it was that the menacing monster had instead of a soul.

This was a Shadow.

Just as this thought appeared in Sunny's mind, the faintly familiar voice of the Spell resounded above the dark waters of the Soul Sea:

[You have created a Shadow Monster: Stone Saint.]

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Hearing these words, Sunny smiled. However, a second later, the smile disappeared from his lips, replaced by a pained expression.

Only now, after the process was complete, he felt a subtle emptiness permeating his whole body. He felt… weakened. The loss of a hundred shadow fragments was finally making its effect known. He had suspected that spending them in this way would reverse the process of power accumulation that had consumed him for these last few months, but it was still an unpleasant feeling.

He was much stronger than he had been during the journey through the Labyrinth, however, some of his physical might was unmistakably gone, leaving him with a bitter feeling of regret.

No, no… he had known that this would happen, and decided to proceed with the experiment anyway.

It was well worth it.

Forgetting about the change in his physical state, Sunny walked around his Shadow and observed her from different sides. The Stone Saint's eyes silently followed his movements, sending glints of crimson light reflecting from the black surface of the tranquil sea.

'This is… amazing. I wonder what she is capable of…'

Summoning the runes, Sunny immediately noticed that there was a new cluster shining right beneath the one describing his Echoes.

Shadows: [Stone Saint].

Excited to learn more about his new pet monster, Sunny was about to concentrate his attention on the runes, but then stopped and glanced down at his own shadow, a little embarrassed.

"Uh… sorry. How are you feeling, buddy? You aren't, uh, you know… jealous or anything?"

The shadow looked away and pretended that it didn't know him. It was seemingly indifferent to the appearance of a new shadow creature in his service, even though this new Shadow had a capital letter to its name.

"Well, I just wanted to say that you shouldn't be. I still value you very much! Even though the Stone Saint is probably capable of slicing powerful monsters into tiny pieces with her sword, while you're still just a useless piece of… uh… an incredibly capable scout and my most trusted confidant, I still appreciate you. Yeah."

He stared at the shadow for a bit and, seeing that it didn't react in any way, turned away.

'This guy, he'd better step up his game. Ha!'

Focusing on the runes, Sunny summoned the description of the Shadow and read:

Shadow: Stone Saint.

Shadow Rank: Awakened.

Shadow Class: Monster.

Shadow Attributes: [Battle Master], [Stalwart], [Spark of Divinity].

Sunny blinked. It seemed as though Stone Saint's divine Attribute had evolved to match his own. Was it because he was her master? This was a nice surprise. However, he still didn't see how she was different from before.

Frowning, he continued to look through the shimmering runes:

Shadow Description: [Shadow Saint was created by the treacherous Lost From Light in the cursed darkness of the Forgotten Shore.]

'Again with this whole treachery stuff. Can I get another epithet, huh?'

But in the next moment, he forgot all about this little frustration. Because the following line of runes showed him something really unexpected.

Just beneath the description, a familiar set of runes shined in the air:

[Shadow Fragments: 0/200.]

Chapter-107: Growing Shadow

Sunny stared at the runes, perplexed.

Then, a sudden light of understanding appeared in his eyes. He finally realized what was the principal difference between an Echo and a Shadow.

It was really very simple.

The Echoes were mere replicas of the creatures that had left them behind. They were molded in their image and never changed, always remaining the same as the originals at the moment of their deaths.

Shadows, however, were different. After all, they were mercurial by nature, always changing their forms and shapes depending on the environment. And so, a Shadow was capable of change to some extent, too.

It was capable of growth.

His eyes widened.

By slaying Nightmare Creatures, he was able to absorb their shadow fragments and become stronger. Eventually, his Shadow Core was bound to evolve, turning from Dormant to Awakened… and beyond. The jump in power that came with this evolution was nothing short of unmatched.

Granted, he wasn't sure about the particular details of this process, not to mention that, as a human, he could only become an Awakened after returning from the Dream Realm into the real world, which was impossible to do in this godforsaken place. He also didn't know what would happen if he actually managed to accumulate the thousand shadow fragments that the runes demanded.

But no matter what happened, if he were to continue walking forward on the path of the Awakened, he would eventually outgrow his Memories and Echoes, rendering them weak and useless against the enemies of the comparable rank. He would then be forced to discard them and try to find suitable replacements, with no guarantee whatsoever that he would actually succeed.

This problem was not as dire when it came to Memories, which were comparatively easy to get. The Echoes, however, were exceedingly rare. Once an Echo grew too weak to accompany its master, replacing it was an extremely tall task.

But Shadows… Shadows were capable of growing with him, becoming more powerful just as he grew more powerful! As long as Sunny was willing to put in the work, his Shadow would never fall behind.

The possibilities that this simple quality opened up were truly endless. It was enough to completely change his plans for the future. In the past, Sunny always envisioned himself as the main force on the battlefield, only relying on Memories and a stray Echo or two to support him.

That was because Echoes of higher ranks and classes were so unimaginably hard to come by. Although much more rare than Memories, there were still many Dormant Echoes around, and a fair number of Awakened ones too. They were mainly shared among Masters and Saints, who were capable of defeating the Nightmare Creature of these ranks with comparative ease.

But battles against Fallen and Corrupted monsters, not to mention anything even more dreadful, were never easy. As such, there were not enough trophies brought back after killing creatures of their kind to make the idea of acquiring an Echo of a higher rank a realistic possibility.

For everyone… except for Sunny.

He could slaughter weaker monsters, get lesser Echoes, and then cultivate them into unstoppable beasts of slaughter. Not bound by the laws of probability and diminishing chances, he could slowly build an

army of powerful Shadows to fight his battles for him, and then watch them destroy his enemies from a safe distance while sipping on a cocktail.

Uh… that's what rich people drank, right?

Not to mention that monsters were not bound by the need to pass Nightmares to raise their rank… at least not to Sunny's knowledge. To be honest, he had no idea how Nightmare Creatures evolved their cores. Carapace Demon had seemed to do just fine just by eating the fruits of the Soul Tree and slowly absorbing large amounts of soul essence.

In any case, there was a possibility that he would be able to make the Shadow Saint much more powerful than he himself had the chance to become on the Forgotten Shore.

Perhaps even powerful enough to make his life here truly tolerable.

Looking at the Shadow with excited sparks dancing in his eyes, Sunny grinned from ear to ear.

"You and I are going to accomplish great things together, buddy."

If his own shadow wasn't worried about its place in his heart yet, it would be smart to start worrying about it right about now.

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The question that was consuming Sunny's thoughts now was this: how, exactly, was he supposed to feed the Shadow Saint with fragments?

If he could simply transfer some of his own to her, he would do it without a second thought, even though that would diminish his personal strength even further. However, there seemed to be no way to do so. No amount of looking at the runes, touching the silent stone creature or trying to talk to the Spell did the trick.

Sunny even asked for advice from his own shadow, but that guy was in no mood to talk. The scornful word "traitor!" was written all other his expressionless dark spot of a face.

At least that's what Sunny read from it after being met with the silent treatment. In all the excitement, he failed to remember that the shadow was physically unable to speak.

Scratching the back of his head, Sunny paced around the Soul Sea and tried to come up with a reasonable way to stuff some shadow fragments inside the taciturn stone monster.

"Well… the most obvious answer is to go and make her kill some Nightmare Creatures. However, will it work? When my loyal scavenger killed something, it was I who received the fragments, not him. Wait, him? Did Cassie infect me with her childish desire to assign human qualities to everything? It, not him!

It was I and not it. Right, that's better. Wait, what was I talking about?"

Glancing at the outside world, Sunny frowned. It was currently the day there… usually, he would be sound asleep by now. Going out during the day was dangerous. He would have to walk outside the shadows, allowing all kinds of Fallen horrors to lay eyes on him.

He only survived for so long in this hell by being extremely cautious, cowardly, and only hunting during the night. He paid a harsh price to learn these lessons, almost losing his life in the process.

But still, still… should he risk it?

Chapter-108: Test Dummy

Still undecided, Sunny dismissed the Stone Saint. He was curious to see if the slumbering Shadow would become a sphere of light just like an Echo would.

However, she did not.

As soon as he gave the command, the ornate armor of the stone creature was immediately engulfed in black flame, and with a gust of ghostly wind, she was gone. It seemed as though the Shadow was returned into the embrace of the Shadow Core that had created her, and was now sleeping in its depths, bathed in the invisible waves of nurturing dark flames.

Sunny scratched the back of his head. So, the Shadows literally dwelled within the deepest part of his soul. He didn't really know how to feel about this, but felt that it was strangely fitting.

He was a child of shadows himself, after all.

With a thoughtful sigh, Sunny emerged from the Soul Sea and looked around his secret lair.

Outside the ruined cathedral, the sun was shining above the cursed city. But none of its rays could reach this tranquil hidden chamber. Sunny suspected that once, a long ago, the secret room served as the private quarters of a venerated young priestess who performed sacred rites in this temple.

He had found some of her things in the modest wardrobe that was hidden behind a stone panel, somehow preserved in pristine condition despite the thousands of years that had passed since the city had fallen to the curse of darkness.

If not for the lamentable disparity of their genders, he would have

had a whole collection of clothes to wear, instead of spending every waking hour dressed in the same good old Puppeteer's Shroud.

There were limits to the amount of abuse that even a fifth-tier armor could withstand. However, in a sense, he was lucky. At least his armor was made out of soft fabric. It would have been much worse if he had to wear a suit of plate armor or a rusty chainmail instead.

That priestess, of course, had not used the same extravagant method to enter her private quarters. There actually was a doorway that led outside the room and into a concealed corridor that ended with a narrow stairwell. However, the stairs had long collapsed, leaving only a deep vertical shaft behind. This was Sunny's route of escape in case someone or something would find his lair.

Standing up from the magnificent wooden chair, Sunny paced around for a bit and then lit the fire under a makeshift stove, planning to make himself some late supper. The orange flames illuminated the hidden chamber, sending shadows dancing on its walls.

'Oh, right. I never got fresh meat.'

The night was so eventful that he had completely forgotten the initial purpose of his hunt.

Throwing the last few strips of meat on the grill, he seasoned them with salt and sighed once again. The desire to simply venture outside and get into a fight with the nearest Nightmare Creature seemed more attractive with each minute.

'No, no, no! That's how you end up dead!'

To distract himself from these seductive thoughts, Sunny decided to summon the Stone Saint into the material world and perform a few experiments in the safety of his secret lair.

Standing up, he willed the Shadow to appear.

The secretive chamber was submerged in deep shadows. His own was hidden in one of them, standing with its arms crossed on the cold stone wall. In Sunny's vision, it appeared as a silhouette made from a deeper shade of black.

Usually, an Echo would appear in front of the summoner, weaved from the countless sparks of moving light. However, the Stone Saint entrance was completely different. Instead of materializing out of thin air, she stepped out of his shadow like a sinister dark knight. Wreathed in darkness, her elegant figure emanated a sense of danger and foreboding.

First, two ruby eyes ignited in the depths of the shadow. Then, the darkness came to life and surged forward, taking the form of the deadly stone monster. The sole of her stonelike solleret touched the floor with a loud clang, and a moment later, the Shadow Saint was standing in the middle of his room, her hand resting on the pommel of her sword.

Sunny grimaced, feeling a slight headache.

'So… the shadow was hiding in a shadow, and then the Shadow came out of the shadow to stand with it in the shadows. This is starting to get out of hand. I really need to come up with better terminology!'

He felt that this was a vital problem, but no suitable words came to his mind. Glancing at the silent duo, Sunny hesitantly asked:

"Any ideas?"

Sadly, both his shadow and his Shadow were mute and unable to voice their opinions even if they wanted to. Left with no assistance whatsoever, Sunny sighed.

"Alright, I'll think of something later. For now, let's see what you're capable of."

Summoning his shadow, he wrapped himself in its comforting embrace and faced the Stone Saint, preparing to test her strength. Inhaling deeply, he focused and gave the menacing monster a command:

"Strike me."

Sunny expected that the Shadow would hesitate for a moment, maybe even requiring some persuasion to turn on her master. Instead, the Stone Saint immediately leaned forward and punched

him in the chest without a second thought.

With his physical prowess enhanced by the shadow, Sunny was sure of his ability to withstand one blow from the awakened monster, at least to a certain degree. However, he was wrong.

So, so wrong.

Before he could even react, the armor-clad stone fist crashed into his ribs, making Sunny feel as though he was hit by a train. In the next second, he found himself lying on the floor, surrounded by numerous pieces of broken wood.

'Oh… oh no! My chair!'

The magnificent chair was gone, ruthlessly turned into splinters and firewood by the impact with his back. It was completely unsalvageable.

Sunny's back wasn't doing much better.

Turning onto his stomach with a moan, Sunny spat a bit of blood on the stone floor and weakly raised one hand, giving the Shadow Saint thumbs up.

"Ugh… good, well done. Ten out of ten, just like… crap, that really hurts… just like I expected!"

Casting a furtive glance at the elegant stone knight, he forced a smile out and tried to stand up.

'I think I need to amend some details of the future experiments.'

Next, Sunny was planning to enhance the Stone Saint with the shadow before getting her to strike him again.

However, on second thought, there were better ways to measure her power…

Chapter-109: Soulmates

Picking himself up from the floor, Sunny staggered and found his way back to the fire burning under the improvised grill. Glancing at the motionless stone knight, he spat a bit more blood and groaned.

As the appetizing aroma of roasting meat filled the air, the Blood Weave got busy repairing his body. By the time his supper was ready, Sunny was able to breathe without wincing.

Putting the meat on his prized possession — the luxurious silver plate — Sunny prepared to eat.

On the Forgotten Shore, simple everyday necessities like plates were rarer than enchanted swords and magical suits of armor. In the whole cursed city, only Gunlaug and his five lieutenants were able to dine with as much decorum as Sunny.

Granted, he had yet to find even a single pair of chopsticks in this whole damn place, let alone something more technologically advanced, like a spoon. Of course, Sunny could try and make one himself, but that wasn't the same thing.

The Shadow Saint was silently looking at him with her burning ruby eyes. Feeling uncomfortable under her mysterious gaze, Sunny glanced at his plate, then at the menacing stone creature.

"Uh… you want some?"

He raised a piece of meat and offered it to the taciturn monster. However, the Stone Saint showed no reaction at all.

"Well… suit yourself."

Using the Prowling Thorn as a kitchen utensil, Sunny dug in, devouring the juicy meat like a starving animal. With not a single

human soul around, he didn't bother with table manners at all.

'Uh… that's the life!'

His perpetually hungry outskirt self would have been really shocked to see this extravagant feast. That was real meat! He had hunted and prepared it himself, no less. More than that, he got to enjoy a similar type of luxury food almost every day.

Of course, that real meat had come from a revolting horror of a monster, but these were just small details.

Chewing on the last piece with a sense of deep satisfaction, Sunny thoughtfully looked at the Stone Saint. It was time to continue…

Earlier, he wanted to see if there was a possible synergy between the different powers that his Aspect possessed. Namely, if the enhancement provided by Shadow Control could be applied to Shadows. Sunny knew that his shadow was able to enhance his body, his Memories, and, with lesser effect, various inanimate objects.

However, it was unable to enhance other humans and Memories that belonged to them, as well as any living creature except for Sunny himself. He had secretly tested it during his travels with Nephis and Cassie to come up with this conclusion.

More importantly, it couldn't affect Echoes.

But what about Shadows?

Giving a mental command, Sunny sent his shadow in the direction of the Stone Saint and held his breath.

Flowing like water, the shadow silently grasped the statuesque monster in its dark embrace. Then, it seemed to disappear, as though absorbed by the stone flesh of the tenebrous knight.

A moment later, Stone Saint's ruby eyes blazed with crimson fire. Her smooth granite skin shined with dark radiance once again, smoky wisps of the ghostly grey fog oozing from beneath her stonelike armor like dancing flames.

Suddenly, it felt as though the temperature in the hidden chamber dropped by a couple of degrees. Shadows around the menacing creature seemed to swell, becoming deeper and darker, like a vast mantle sewn from boundless empty blackness.

The elegant Stone Saint had always looked dangerous and deadly, but now, she was downright fearsome.

Even without having the Shadow Saint strike him again, Sunny could tell that the experiment ended in a resounding success. It was apparent that the two types of his shadows were practically created for each other. Her power was increased twofold, at least.

A bit peeved, he looked down and sighed.

'Why does she look so much cooler than I do when using the shadow? Shouldn't it be the other way around? I'm the true divine shadow here, me! Where's my aura of mysterious coolness?!'

Shaking his head, Sunny lamented his lack of good looks and simultaneously congratulated himself on becoming the master of such a stylish monster. Technically, it didn't matter how his Shadows looked, just as long as they were powerful. However, he was secretly glad that his first Shadow was not only powerful, but also a darkly beautiful sight to behold.

Killing monsters was great, but killing monsters while looking good was even better.

'Wait… if she can use my shadow, what else can she use?'

Suddenly excited, Sunny finally swallowed the half-forgotten piece of meat and dismissed the Stone Saint. Then, he shifted his perspective to look at the Soul Sea and summoned her again, this time inside it.

The Shadow appeared in the whirlwind of black flames and stood motionlessly upon the still waters of the silent sea. Her mysterious ruby eyes stared at him through the narrow visor of her stone helmet.

Not wasting any time, Sunny looked up at the spheres of light circling around the Shadow Core.

'What if I can equip her with actual Memories?'

What to choose… she was extremely strong and very proficient with her round shield, so wasn't it logical to assume that a tower shield would suit her even better? Coincidentally, he happened to have one of those!

Sunny summoned the Memory that he had gotten in one of the fights on the streets of the cursed city. It was a large, square tower shield that was almost as tall as him. The thing was too heavy and unwieldy to actually use in combat, at least not by Sunny. Plus, he wielded a tachi, which could only perform to its full potential while held in both hands.

Grabbing the cumbersome shield, Sunny walked over to the Shadow Saint and handed it to her with a hopeful smile.

"Here. Take this. Uh… please?"

The Shadow stared at him for a few moments, then lowered her head and glanced at the tower shield.

'Come on. Come on, take it!'

His heart skipped a beat when the statuesque creature slowly raised her hands and grasped the Memory with her stone gauntlets.

"Yes, that's right! Now, use it!"

The Stone Saint obediently brought the shield to her chest.

And then… shattered it.

Sunny froze, his mouth hanging open.

[Your Memory has been destroyed.]

'...What?'

The shards of the broken Memory turned into a river of tiny sparks of light, just like the Echo of the carapace scavenger and the Azure Blade had done before disappearing forever.

'My tower shield!'

Sunny felt a sharp dagger of sorrow stab at his heart. Yes, the shield was of no use to him. But it would sell for so much money in the real world! Why, why did this evil thing have to break it? Why? Wasn't his beautiful chair enough?!

He gazed at the tiny sparks, wanting to cry. However, a moment later, his eyes widened.

Because the river of sparks did not disappear. Instead, it circled around the Stone Saint's body and then suddenly flowed through it, separating into two streams. Each stream was then absorbed by one of the dark embers burning in the depths of the living shadow that was hiding inside the monster's body.

Sunny blinked.

[Stone Saint has grown stronger.]

Chapter-110: Memento

Sunny stared at the Shadow Saint, dumbfounded.

The storm of emotions that the destruction of the tower shield had produced was still tugging on his heartstrings, but now, an equally powerful feeling was slowly welling up in his chest. Not knowing how to process all of this, he simply blinked a couple of times and said in a flat tone:

"Huh?"

'So, let me get this straight…'

He gave the shield to his pet monster hoping that she would be able to use it. And she did, sort of. It's just that instead of wielding the Memory, she… ate it.

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, wondering if he had finally lost it. But no, the echo of the Spell's voice was still resounding above the dark waters, whispering the same phrase over and over again.

Stone Saint has grown stronger.

With a heavy sigh, Sunny summoned the runes and found the description of the Shadow. Down at the very bottom of it, the runes were slightly changed:

Shadow Fragments: [2/200].

A wild gleam appeared in his eyes. Two fragments… he had received the Memory of the tower shield after slaying a particularly hardy wraith, who, despite its frightening appearance, had turned out to be merely an awakened monster. For killing it, Sunny himself had received four shadow fragments.

But that was because his own Shadow Core was Dormant, and as such, he always got double the reward in battles against creatures of the higher rank — two for each Soul Core that an awakened creature possessed.

The Stone Saint was such a creature herself, so it was logical to assume that she would not receive the same treatment. The tower shield had come from a monster with two awakened cores, so she received two fragments for consuming its Memory.

Which meant that…

With a fire of excitement burning in his eyes, Sunny hurriedly summoned another Memory. A disgusting eye with a menacing vertical pupil appeared from the dissipating brightness of the descending sphere of light.

That eye came from a basilisk-like creature that Sunny had killed a few weeks ago. To survive the battle, he had to fight it with his own eyes closed, relying solely on the Shadow Sense to move through the rubble and dodge the attacks of the deadly beast.

In the end, he had beheaded the vile thing with a slash of his swift blade seconds before being ripped apart by its claws. It was a fine test for his nascent combat skill.

Sadly, the Memory came with none of the powers that the actual beast had possessed. It was only capable of producing a harmless beam of red light, which could only be used for creating mood lighting… at least in the case of Sunny, who could see in the dark.

Grabbing the eye, he held it out for the Stone Saint to take.

The Shadow grasped the disgusting thing, brought it to her chest, and then crushed it in her armored fist. Once again, the Memory disintegrated into countless tiny sparks of ethereal light, which were then absorbed by the darkness hiding inside the elegant creature's body.

[Stone Saint has grown stronger.]

Sunny grinned, then threw his head back and laughed.

So that's how it was… the Shadows fed on Memories! They consumed them to receive power, just like he killed Nightmare Creatures to consume the remnants of their shadows.

To make sure, he glanced at the runes again and saw exactly what he had expected to see:

Shadow Fragments: [3/200].

Tier-one Awakened Memory, one fragment. Makes sense.

Giddy with anticipation, Sunny summoned the next Memory. A bulky suit of rusty plate armor appeared from the sphere of light and hovered in the air in front of him. This one he had received after burning the towering nest of monstrous, flesh-devouring termites to the ground.

Creating a bonfire in the absolute darkness of the Forgotten Shore's night was a dangerous endeavor, but he had hoped to receive hundreds of shadow fragments by eviscerating the whole swarm of these tiny gluttonous creatures. Judging by the amount of bones littering the ground around the nest, they were a real plague.

Sadly, the entire colony had turned out to be a single demonic being, landing him only six fragments. He even had to retreat without collecting the soul shards from the smoldering remains of the hive, scared away by the approach of several Fallen horrors that had been attracted by the bright flames.

The Memory was of little consolation, since his own Puppeteer's Shroud was superior to it in all regards.

But now, finally, it could be of use!

The Stone Saint devoured the armor just like she had devoured the other two Memories. Once again, the Spell announced that the shadow monster had grown stronger. The runes changed again:

Shadow Fragments: [6/200].

Every time the numbers changed, Sunny felt a deep sense of satisfaction. His menacing stone knight was becoming more fearsome

with each second. He suspected that gambling addicts felt something similar in the throes of a rare winning streak.

Caught in the moment, he grasped the next Memory, but then stopped and stared at the small silver bell that lay silently in his hand.

This one… this one was the first Memory he had ever received, barely holding onto life in the bitter cold and terror of the First Nightmare. It was the weakest Memory he had, but also the most meaningful. Sunny had killed one human to receive it, and had used it to kill another.

The Silver Bell was a reminder.

With bleak eyes, he read the runes that shimmered in the lightless emptiness of his soul:

[...a small memento of a long-lost home, which once brought its owner comfort and joy.]

Suddenly drained of the excitement that had been consuming him just a few moments ago, Sunny sighed heavily and dismissed the Memory. There was a dark expression on his face.

Glancing at the motionless Shadow Saint, he turned away.

"That's enough for today… Ah, what a long day. I think I'll go to sleep now."

Leaving the Soul Sea, he stood silently for a few minutes, then slowly walked to his bed and fell on it. Dismissing the Puppeteer's Shroud, Sunny wrapped himself in the blanket and closed his eyes.

He was so tired.

Chapter-111: Lesser Creature

Sunny woke up from the oppressive feeling that drowned the whole world. The sunset was drawing near, and with it, the abyssal shadow of the Crimson Spire had once again fallen on the cursed city.

The distant spire could be seen from anywhere in these somber ruins, looming over the Forgotten Shore like an eternal dark omen. It was cyclopean and unimaginably high, with its roots growing from the endless sea of crimson coral and its peak lost somewhere beyond the veil of grey clouds.

In these past few months, Sunny had gotten accustomed to its presence and learned to not pay it any attention. Thinking about the Spire was a sure road to madness.

After all, somewhere inside that inconceivable structure lay their only hope of ever returning home.

And hope was a poison.

Yawning, Sunny stood up and stretched his arms. His good mood, which he had momentarily lost for some strange reason, was already returning.

Now that he had some time to put the events of the previous night into perspective, he understood even more clearly how amazing his luck had been recently. The acquisition of the Stone Saint and her following transformation into a Shadow were nothing short of miraculous.

His life was about to change for the better!

However, Sunny had to think things through thoroughly. He was in uncharted waters in regards to how to cultivate his pet monster.

The initial excitement he felt after realizing that the Shadow Saint was capable of consuming Memories to collect shadow fragments was gone. In its place, there now was a series of uncomfortable questions.

Sunny had spent somewhere around six months on the Forgotten Shore. In all this time, he had only been able to collect three Memories that were suitable to be fed to the Shadow, giving her mere six shadow fragments.

With the current speed of progression, he would have to wait for sixteen full years to see his labor bear fruit and find out what exactly was going to happen once the Stone Saint had accumulated all two hundred shadow fragments that the runes demanded.

Even among the elites of Gunlaug's army, the was no one who had survived on the Forgotten Shore for more than ten years. The King of the Castle himself had only been here for eight, and only lived that long in large part due to luck.

Granted, Sunny's battle ability would grow dramatically once the deadly stone knight was added into the equation, but still, it was too long. He had to think of something.

While he was doing the math, Sunny's eyes fell on the iron chest that stored his painstakingly accumulated fortune of soul shards. Distracted, he froze for a few moments, then hesitantly approached the chest and stared at its lid.

By the standards of the Forgotten Shore, he was an incredibly rich man. His fortune could buy him a lot of things in the castle, from comparatively simple to increasingly rare and hard to come by.

…Some of the things that could be easily bought in that pit of despair he didn't even want to think about.

What interested him the most, however, was the possibility of acquiring a large amount of Memories. Powerful Memories with useful enchantments were not cheap. In fact, they were extremely expensive. But he didn't really care about the quality.

Since Stone Saint could get the same amount of fragments from the

most useless of Memories, all he needed was quantity.

If he were to spend all of his shards, her power would instantly leap by a considerable amount. In the future, he would be able to cultivate the Shadow at double the speed, too — half of the materials coming from the Memories he would be acquiring from slaying monsters, the other from the Memories he would be buying with the soul shards the monsters had left behind.

That would potentially reduce the overall timeframe to a somewhat sensible period.

However, there was a big problem with this plan.

Once Sunny began to spend a large number of soul shards, he would inevitably draw a lot of attention. Dealing with random daredevils who would try to rob him, while not pleasant, was not a big problem. But if Gunlaug himself were to become interested in his exploits… that would spell disaster.

And then there was Nephis, whose presence made any sort of planning futile for reasons that only she and Sunny knew.

Everyone else seemed to be blind and deaf to the truth, which was the source of the problem.

Sunny frowned and turned away from the chest.

"I might come back to this idea later. But first, I'll have to check if consuming Memories is the only way for a Shadow to grow stronger."

He still wanted to know if the Stone Saint could absorb shadow fragments by slaying Nightmare Creatures, just like he could.

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Some time later, Sunny was cautiously moving through the stone maze of the forsaken city. Able to become one with the shadows, he had a certain advantage over anyone else who would dare to explore these cursed ruins in the absolute darkness of the night. However, even he was always just one step away from death.

Attracting the attention of the real masters of the streets, the Fallen creatures who dwelled here from the ancient times, would be the end of him. Sunny had no illusions about that.

Humans only survived here by learning how to avoid the Fallen Ones and seek out weaker monsters to hunt. There weren't a lot of lesser creatures who were able to secure a foothold in the cursed city, so hunting them was always dangerous.

Nevertheless, that was what Sunny had made into his profession, and that was what he was doing now.

Finally, he reached the area where he had observed a particular creature in the past. Surprisingly, Sunny was intimately familiar with that type of monster.

After all, one of them had almost cost him his life in the past.

Somewhere around this particular street, a lone carapace centurion had made its lair.

Climbing atop a tall stone column, Sunny stood motionlessly in the darkness and waited for his prey to appear. Time moved excruciatingly slowly, but a good hunter had to have a lot of patience. His dark eyes pierced the veil of night, observing the ghostly ruins.

One hour passed, then another. Sunny waited.

Soon, his patience was finally rewarded.

From the deep darkness of one of the toppled buildings, a familiar hulking shape appeared in all its menacing beauty. The carapace centurion stepped onto the cobblestones, his black carapace decorated with crimson patterns, two terrifying bone scythes scraping against the stone.

Sunny smiled.

The carapace centurion only had time to take a single step before two crimson flames suddenly ignited in the deep shadows that consumed the ruined street.

Then, a graceful stone knight stepped out of the darkness. Raising her shield, she rested the blade of her sword on its rim. Wisps of ghostly grey fog were seeping from under her armor, a strange dark radiance emanating from her skin. The darkness around seemed to move, as though wanting to embrace her like a dark mantle.

The two monsters — one massive and savage, one small and steadfast — froze opposite each other.

…And then, all hell broke loose.

Chapter-112: Duel of the Monsters

Just like in the battle against two Fallen beasts, the Stone Saint attacked first. Striking her sword against the rim of the shield twice, she dashed forward without fear or hesitation.

Of course, Sunny was not sure if Shadows were even capable of feeling fear.

The carapace centurion reacted swiftly and savagely, lunging at her in a furious onslaught of adamantine chitin and jagged blades. In front of this towering creature, Shadow Saint looked meager and slight.

The two monsters collided in the middle of the street, a small shockwave spreading outward from the point of their impact. Dust and small pieces of gravel were sent flying through the air.

Sunny watched the battle with vigilant eyes.

He suspected that these two Nightmare Creatures were somewhat equal in terms of power. The centurion was much bigger and heavier, the impenetrable carapace making it an especially deadly adversary. All carapace creatures were unnaturally tough and strong. It also had the advantage of reach and mass.

The Shadow Saint was equally as resilient due to her heavy armor and stonelike nature. Despite her small frame, the graceful knight possessed a stunning amount of strength. Sunny also had to keep reminding himself that she was not actually human, and as a being made of stone, weighed much more than a human would.

The disadvantage of her size was bridged by battle awareness and skill, making the outcome of the fight unpredictable.

However, that was only true if he failed to account for the dark embrace of his shadow. With its reinforcement, the Stone Saint was unimaginably more powerful.

Sunny was pretty sure that the centurion stood no chance.

Meanwhile, the two monsters were entwined in a ferocious battle. The Shadow Saint withstood the onslaught of bone scythes by bashing one away with her shield and evading the other. Not losing her momentum, she brought the shield down and slammed its edge into the centurion's carapace, causing the hulking creature to stagger.

The force of the impact was so grievous that it sent cracks running through the impregnable carapace. Sunny marveled at the sight, congratulating himself on the decision to not test the augmented monster's strength on himself.

Using the opening that she had created, the Stone Saint twisted her torso and delivered a backhand blow with the boss of the shield, striking the same spot again. The already damaged chitin plate splintered, revealing the soft flesh beneath.

A moment later, she was already moving to evade the fierce retaliation of the savage carapace creature. The graceful knight was miserly in her movements, dodging each strike with measured precision.

Although Sunny was only a novice in the art of combat, he had learned enough to be able to recognize the hints of a distinct battle style in how the Stone Saint fought.

Her whole technique was based in simplicity and economy of movement, each action calculated and efficient. Combining hard blocks, dodges and deflections with grounded footwork and well-timed ripostes, the Shadow was able to create a stark contrast between defense and offense, the former being solid and indomitable, the latter abrupt and inevitable.

It was very different from the flowing and unpredictable style that Nephis had used, and that he himself had been taught. Only now did Sunny realize that the basic katas and forms he had practiced were,

in fact, very unique and unusual.

Where did his fighting style come from?

There was a lot to consider here, both in terms of how to improve his current technique and how to incorporate new elements into it. However, that was a task for the future.

Right now, he was more interested in the outcome of the fight.

The Stone Saint was already suppressing her monstrous enemy. A few of the centurion's legs were either broken or severed, streams of azure blood gashing out of the terrible wounds. However, it was still resisting furiously.

But no matter how enraged it became, the silent and menacing poise of the graceful shadow knight was much more terrifying.

Just at that moment, the Shadow Saint sidestepped a downward slash of one of the centurion's scythes and then pinned it under her greave. Using her weight to immobilize the enemy's weapon, she delivered a vicious blow with the rim of her shield and shattered the bone blade into pieces.

The carapace monster screeched, dazed by the loss of its scythe, and immediately tried to eviscerate the loathsome little fiend with the remaining one. However, he was a fraction of a second too late. With one side of its body left defenseless, the Stone Saint now had much more space to attack.

Deflecting the scythe with the shield, she dashed forward and lashed out with an upward slash, severing it near the joint. Continuing the motion, she then stepped through the rain of azure blood and mercilessly thrust her sword into the opening in the centurion's armor that had been created by her at the start of the fight.

The stone blade pierced through the flesh of the monster and devastated its spine. The force of the blow was so immense that the tip of the sword broke through the chitin on the centurion's back.

Pulling the sword out of the dying creature's body with one sharp motion, the Shadow Saint shook the blood off the blade. Then, she

indifferently stepped back and froze, seemingly turning into a dark, motionless sculpture. Only the crimson fire still burning in her ruby eyes betrayed that the Shadow was alive.

Sunny held his breath, waiting for the Spell to speak. Soon, he heard its faintly familiar voice:

[You have slain an awakened monster, Carapace Centurion.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

Slightly disappointed, he summoned the runes and checked the number of the shadow fragments in his possession.

Shadow Fragments: [307/1000].

'Ninety-three left to four hundred,' he thought automatically.

Then, just to be sure, Sunny glanced at the description of the Stone Saint.

Shadow Fragments: [6/200].

So… just like with the Echoes, the kills performed by the Shadow benefitted her master instead of the monster herself. It seemed as though consuming Memories was truly the only way to feed the Stone Saint.

Sunny frowned.

"Well. That complicates things…"

Chapter-113: Dark Well

After the Shadow Saint had ruthlessly eviscerated the carapace centurion and confirmed Sunny's suspicion that he wouldn't be able to cultivate her in that way, he was left with nothing much to do.

The night was still young, but he had already achieved his goal. Now, he was free to do whatever he wished… however, there weren't very many options available in the cursed city.

He could continue to hunt, reveling in the newfound power. With the Stone Saint at his command, Sunny would be able to bathe the ruins in monster blood. However, that thought, no matter how seductive, left him uneasy.

Hunting in this hellish place required patience and preparation. He only survived this long by carefully scouting the potential battlegrounds in advance and studying his prey from the shadows to learn its strengths and weaknesses, not rushing into a fight until he was absolutely sure that there was a solid chance of victory.

Shadow Saint or not, betraying these principles would still get him killed. And with his mental state, uh… slightly unstable, Sunny didn't trust himself to stay cautious once the easy wins kept piling up. He had to proceed slowly.

Looking around the quiet ruins, Sunny smiled slightly. Actually, he wasn't that far from the Library…

He had indeed turned hunting Nightmare Creatures into a sort of profession, but it was just that: a job. Like any well-adjusted young man, he also had a hobby.

In his free time, Sunny liked to explore the ruins.

The warm feeling of satisfaction he had experienced after finding the

hidden nest of the Vile Thieving Bird never left his memory. There was something deeply engaging in uncovering fragments of long-lost history and piecing them together. Maybe Sunny had inherited this passion from Teacher Julius, or maybe it had always been slumbering deep within his heart.

In any case, he enjoyed exploring the ancient city a great deal. It was full of all kinds of mysteries, both large and small. After thousands of years had passed, most traces of the past had been erased by the merciless flow of time. But by looking in the right places and exercising critical thinking, insight and imagination, it was possible to piece together tiny shards of truth.

Every time the seemingly disparate clues clicked into a coherent picture, Sunny felt a pleasant rush. Interestingly enough, it didn't matter whether that picture pertained to something important or completely useless.

In fact, he enjoyed learning about the small details of the daily life that the inhabitants of the ancient city had once led much more than he enjoyed learning about the possible origins of the catastrophe that had befallen them — despite the fact that the latter was directly related to his own survival.

For example, he was very curious to learn more about the young priestess whose private quarters he had made into his secret lair. The things she had left behind told him a lot about how the people of the city used to dress and think about the world, filling his imagination with colorful pictures of crowded streets and solemn cathedrals. But it was still not enough.

His latest exploration project was the ruins of a grand library. Of course, none of the books and scrolls had survived the thousand of years in the cursed darkness. Luckily, the people who used to live in the city before its fall were very fond of stone engravings. He spent a lot of time studying the intact wall carvings, as well as fragments of surviving frescoes.

One fresco, in particular, was especially grandiose and tantalizing, covering the entire floor of the library's main hall. Sadly, it was almost completely buried under rubble. Sunny had managed to clear

some of it away, but most pieces of the collapsed roof were too heavy for him to lift. Maybe the Shadow Saint would have more luck.

It was a suitable plan, but, for some reason, Sunny felt strangely reluctant to return to the exploration of the library on that particular night.

'Huh… what else can I do?'

He jumped down from the stone column and approached the dead carapace centurion to carve out some meat and the soul shards.

Come to think of it… come to think of it, the spot marked on the crude map that he had found on the body of the strange hunting party's leader was not that far away, too.

Maybe he could check it out.

Sunny vehemently shook his head.

'No, no… the map has to be fake anyway. Right?'

Trying to suppress the unhealthy fire of curiosity burning in his chest, Sunny concentrated on the task at hand. Once the meat and the shards were in his possession, though, the persistent desire to follow the map returned.

'And if it's not fake, that's even worse. Who knows what kind of horror those fools were searching for?'

Surely, there wouldn't be any treasure or important secrets hidden there. This whole thing smelled of nothing but peril. In fact, it reeked of something sinister, terrifying, and utterly evil.

Sunny sighed.

'But honestly, what's the harm in taking one tiny look? It's just one look... what's the worst that can happen?'

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Quietly stepping through the stone rubble, Sunny cautiously

approached the spot marked on the map. For some strange reason, very few Nightmare Creatures seemed to choose this remote part of the city as their hunting grounds. It was as though they were compelled to avoid this place.

Come to think about it, that fact alone would be enough to scare Sunny away. In normal circumstances. But with the Stone Saint hiding in his shadow, he felt a bit braver.

He would be able to run away if anything happens, at least.

Approaching a large building that had been magnificent once, Sunny climbed over the collapsed wall and found himself in a dark and secluded courtyard.

In the center of the courtyard, there was a well. Its round mouth loomed like an open wound in the stone, filled with nothing but empty blackness. The well was covered with a strange, ornate iron grate. It must have weighed several tons at least, as though someone desperately wanted to prevent anything from ever lifting it from its place and leaving the well open.

Sunny gulped before approaching and looking through the grill of the grate. The silent well was so deep that he couldn't see its bottom.

…Maybe there wasn't one.

Picking up a small stone, Sunny dropped it down. The black mouth of the well swallowed the stone, making it disappear.

Many seconds passed, but there was no sound of the rock hitting anything.

Sunny was almost ready to try again, but then…

The well spoke.

A melodic, strangely enchanting voice resounded from its dark depths, filling Sunny's ears with sweetness.

"Ah, a guest…"

He staggered back, his eyes opening wide in fear.

'Nope. Not doing that!'

Sunny wanted to turn around and run away, but something stopped him from following his instinct. He sensed that leaving without finding out more was going to be a wrong decision.

And the voice sounded so… so human-like…

It was like the voice of someone you would want to be your friend.

He shook his head, breaking free from the reverie.

'What were those damned fools up to?! What are they doing there in that damn castle?! I need to warn Nephis… no, wait… I need to find out more first. I'll try to understand what is going on here, but if there's any sign of danger, I run.'

Gritting his teeth, Sunny forced himself to stay still.

A moment later, the well whispered:

"How wonderful. I haven't been fed in a long, long time…"

Chapter-114: Voice of Darkness

The enchanting voice came from the well in a wave of whispering echoes. It was soft and charming, flowing like a smooth silken melody. It seemed to belong to a young man… if mere humans could even possess such a voice. A divine being would suit it more.

…Or a profane one.

Sunny wasn't in the mood to appreciate the smooth and rich texture of the voice, though.

He was covered in cold sweat.

The echoes whispered:

"...time, …time, …time."

In all his time on the Forgotten Shore, Sunny had only met one other creature capable of mimicking human speech. The memory of that encounter still made him tremble.

The thing that had come from the depths of the dark sea in a mantle of fog and stolen Cassie's voice was by far the most terrifying being he had ever met. He didn't even want to remember the utter horror he had felt when the swarm of whispering voices had surrounded him. On that night, Sunny had only been able to keep his sanity intact because of the blind girl's timely warning.

He had only survived the meeting with the creature that possessed a human voice by keeping his eyes tightly shut.

And now, here was another.

'Why were those hunters searching for this ancient horror?'

He frowned. If something sinister was brewing inside the castle, he

had to warn Changing Star. But he couldn't do anything before establishing at least some understanding of the entire situation.

That's why Sunny forced himself to stay still despite the fact that every instinct in his body screamed for him to run away. Instinct was not always the best advisor. Humans possessed intelligence for a reason.

…The black fissure of the well loomed in front of him like a pool of darkness. Suddenly, he was incredibly grateful for the immensely heavy ornate grate that kept the charming talker imprisoned in the lightless depths.

Sunny licked his lips and tried to regain his composure. Ready to summon the Stone Saint and the Midnight Shard at any moment, he took a step forward and gazed into the dark emptiness once again.

Then, he slowly said:

"It's… nice to meet you."

He couldn't quite believe that he was trying to communicate with the terrifying prisoner of the well instead of running away without looking back. Life was sure full of surprises.

Until the moment it gave you the last one, of course.

A soft chuckle resounded from the well. After its melodious murmur disappeared in the darkness of the secluded courtyard, the voice said:

"Oh, no… the pleasure is mine…"

The echoes whispered:

"...mine, …mine, …mine."

Sunny was considering his next words very carefully.

'My life might be depending on what I say next…'

He couldn't help but remember old fairy tales about terrible monsters that liked to play riddles with lost children. One wrong answer, and

the children were devoured, never to be seen again. Was he going to end up in similar danger?

It was still not too late to turn back.

However, before he could ask his question or make the decision to retreat, the thing in the well spoke again. It said:

"So… are you guys going to feed me or not? Not to offend anyone, but lately, you've been very tardy. I have been sitting here by my lonesome for three days already. Or have you decided to try something new?"

Sunny blinked.

'What?'

That… that wasn't exactly what he expected to hear from the mouth of an ancient evil. The thing sounded so… human. He was almost tempted to believe that it actually was.

'That's how it gets you, fool!'

Sunny forced himself to remain vigilant. What did he know about how primordial evils were supposed to talk, anyway? If it was able to steal the knowledge of human language from his head, it would surely be able to steal some other things too.

While Sunny was trying to comprehend what was happening, a few seconds flew by. The voice waited for a bit, then returned:

"Oh, I see. So we are going with starvation now. Well… I have to give you guys some credit, this is your best idea yet. Sadly, it won't work. Do you even know what type of diets we trainees have to follow to debut? I guess not.

Actually, I have to thank you. This is a great opportunity to work on my BMI."

The echoes whispered:

"...BMI, …BMI, …BMI."

'Wait… what?!'

Sunny stared into the well, dumbfounded. His eye twitched.

'Don't tell me… don't tell me that there is really just some guy sitting on the bottom of that damn well!'

Feeling like the world suddenly stopped making any sense, he rubbed his temples, then asked in a strange tone:

"Who are you?"

The well fell silent.

Sunny tried to remember what the charming voice had told him before. Something about not being fed in a long time. It surely sounded ominous and creepy in the moment, but if he looked at it a bit differently… if the group of hunters he lured to their deaths had been on its way to deliver food to a prisoner… then that would explain why the poor guy had to skip a few meals…

But why would they keep someone imprisoned in this remote area of the ruins?

Meanwhile, the voice spoke again. This time, it sounded tense:

"Wait, you're not one of the… you're not… oh! Oh, gods!"

Sunny covered his face with his hand, realizing what was going to happen next.

"Oh, gods! It's not a human… heavens, I'm going to die. Those damn fools finally got me killed!"

From the perspective of a Sleeper locked inside a well in the middle of the ruins, only two types of beings could come here to find him: either his captors or… Nightmare Creatures.

Sunny revealed that he wasn't one of the captors by asking his last question, which left only one other possibility. The fact that he came to the well during the night, alone, and not using anything to light the way only made the conclusion easier to make.

"Wait, it speaks… oh, gods! I've only ever heard of one other creature on the Forgotten Shore that can mimic human speech… no, no, no! Not like this…"

'Damn, he really does have a nice voice. It's beautiful even when full of despair… huh, what? It's just a voice! Why am I so enamored with… uh…'

Was he so desperate to hear a human voice? Why? He was doing fine on his own. Great, even! Better than ever.

'Focus on the task!'

But what exactly was the task?

Sunny had never expected to find a human at the end of the crude map. What was he supposed to do now?

'I guess the first step would be to find out who the guy in the well is, and how he got there. Then I can decide what to do with him, or if I should do anything at all.'

But there hid the problem… first, Sunny had to convince the young man in the well that he was actually a human, too.

Sunny glanced at his shadow, feeling somewhat helpless.

The shadow was bent over, holding its stomach. Its shoulders were shaking.

Chapter-115: Nightingale

Sunny could really understand how bad the situation looked from the perspective of the young man with a beautiful voice.

The only thing that could be worse than approaching a terrifying dark well while thinking that there's an ancient and utterly evil creature hiding inside was to actually be locked inside that terrifying dark well while thinking that some abominable thing was looking down on you from above.

At least Sunny had a chance to escape if things were to turn really bad. The poor guy in the well literally had nowhere to run.

Of course, there was still the possibility that all of this was just a cunning act performed by some incredibly horrifying monster. Sunny had to keep that in mind while exploring the other theory.

'So… if he is indeed a human, how do I make him believe that I'm not a monster?'

That wasn't a very simple task for Sunny. He had never been good at communicating with people in the first place, and three months of complete isolation did not make things any better. In fact, they had made everything worse.

Now, even Sunny sometimes felt uncomfortable when talking to himself.

'Uh… what would Cassie say?'

He cleared his throat.

"Are you a… human? I am too. I am a human, too. We are both… humans."

'Great job, idiot!'

After that abhorrent attempt, Sunny wouldn't be even surprised to find out that he was not, in fact, a human. Who talks like that?

The young man in the well grew silent. Then, he silently said:

"Yeah, it's definitely all over for me. Oh, well. I had a good run, I guess…"

Sunny sighed heavily.

"Stop panicking, you idiot! I really am a human!"

The owner of the charming voice laughed:

"Please forgive me if I don't believe you."

He was using respectful honorifics, as though recognizing Sunny as an elder. Which was logical, given that he believed him to be an eldritch horror. An eldritch horror would technically count as an elder, all things considered.

Sunny groaned inwardly.

"Why are you using honorifics? I bet I'm younger than you."

The young man imprisoned in the well hesitated.

"Wait, you really are a human?"

Sunny smiled with excitement, feeling that he was making progress.

"Yes. I really am."

The voice returned a dozen seconds later:

"How come you're here alone and in the middle of the night? You also don't seem to have any source of light with you. Please don't get angry, sir monster, but that's not exactly something a human would be able to do. Maybe you should work on your story a bit more next time you venture out to devour innocent souls? Just a, well, a piece of friendly advice."

Sunny sighed.

"Very funny. I'm able to walk around the city at night because my Aspect allows me to hide in the darkness. I can also see through it, too. How did you end up in this well, anyway?"

The young man lingered before answering.

"How does one usually end up in these situations? A bunch of thugs decided to shake me down for my Memories. I politely refused, and here we are. They've been keeping me here for a couple of weeks, trying all kinds of methods to get me to transfer the Memories to them. But I must say, their attempts were very clumsy.

In terms of knowing how to terrorize people, these fellows are not even anywhere near the laziest of sasaengs."

Sunny didn't know what a sasaeng was, so he just assumed that it was some kind of a horribly malevolent Nightmare Creature. The rest of the story was somewhat easy to believe. Of course, it would take a very special kind of fool to choose the ruins, of all places, to keep a prisoner, but thugs were not known for their intelligence.

Plus, their plan seemed to have worked pretty well right until the moment they had the misfortune of stumbling onto Sunny.

Well… now he knew what this whole thing was about. Just some tiresome human business.

'How disappointing.'

Nephis and Cassie were also not in any sort of danger, at least not with regard to this mess. The mystery was solved. He had wasted a whole night on this nonsense.

"I see. Well… goodbye."

With an annoyed sigh, Sunny turned around and began to walk away. However, the owner of the beautiful voice stopped him:

"Wait! Wait! Are you… are you really human?"

Sunny grimaced.

"I am! I've told you already!"

The young man imprisoned in the well hurriedly asked:

"Can you maybe get me out of here? Those guys are not coming back tonight, I think. If you help me escape, I'll make it worth your while!"

Sunny scratched the back of his head, then frowned:

"In what way?"

After a short pause, the charming voice returned again, this time somewhat hesitant:

"Well, you might not know this, but I am quite a rich person. I have a whole stash of soul shards back in the castle. Some might even say that I have a small fortune. Half of it is yours if you get me out of this pit. That's ten shards, at least!"

Sunny suddenly got an idea. Of course, he did not need the ten shards that the young man was offering. The fact that he had these shards, though… that was potentially very useful.

If he wanted to avoid unnecessary attention when buying Memories with his hoard of soul shards, he would need a suitable proxy. A Sleeper with a lot of shards of his own, one that was indebted to Sunny no less, was a perfect candidate.

He smiled.

"Do people know that you have a fortune?"

The young man answered, a bit of surprise in his voice.

"Do they… know? Yeah, I guess they do. I am known to spend a lot from time to time. On entertainment, as well as, uh... some other things. I'm a patron of arts, one can say."

'Perfect… so no one would be surprised if he suddenly begins to spend shards on Memories.'

However, there was a small problem. Sunny could remove the grate, but he had no way of helping the poor guy climb out of that unimaginably deep well. Even if he was to use the Prowling Thorn, he doubted that the invisible string would reach that far. Its maximum length was not that impressive.

And he certainly was not going to climb into the creepy well himself.

Plus, he still held a bit of suspicion about the charming young man's identity. He was almost certain that he was human… but the remaining tiny bit of doubt was enough to make his paranoia ring the alarm.

After hesitating for a bit, Sunny said:

"What's your name?"

The melodic voice answered:

"It's Kai."

Sunny sighed.

"Well, Kai, I don't know how to tell you this… but unless you can fly, I won't be able to help you escape."

The young man grew quiet. After a long pause permeated with deathly silence, he then said in a strange tone:

"...I can."

Sunny blinked.

"What?"

Did he hear wrong? No, that was unlikely.

…Maybe Kai was just willing to say anything in his desperation to escape.

The prisoner of the well chuckled.

"I can fly. That's my Aspect Ability."

Chapter-116: Deal with the Devil

Sunny considered Kai's words. An ability that allowed the Awakened to fly was not unheard of, but it was rather rare. And here on the Forgotten Shore, where a cursed flood of darkness devoured the world every night, it was nothing short of priceless.

Sunny couldn't even imagine how easier it would have been to traverse the Labyrinth with someone like Kai by his side.

Suddenly, it made a lot more sense why someone like him would possess a small fortune of soul shards. It also explained why his captors were so gentle in their attempts to force the Memories out of the young man. He was much more valuable alive.

Sunny remained motionless for some time, thinking things over. After a while, Kai spoke again, his pleasant voice tinted with a bit of apprehension:

"Well? Will you help me?"

Sunny sighed and walked back to the dark fissure of the well:

"Alright. I'll remove this grate, and you can fly out. However, I don't really need your shards. If you want to come out of there alive, you'll have to do something for me instead."

The prisoner of the well hesitated, then cautiously asked:

"What?"

Sunny smiled.

"I'll tell you when you need to know. Don't worry, it's nothing serious.

I just need help completing a few errands inside the castle. So, do we have a deal or not? If not, I'll be on my way. I've wasted enough time here already."

Kai didn't have to think about it too long. Soon, his voice resounded from the darkness once again:

"We have a deal."

It sounded strangely relaxed, as though the young man had become resigned to fate.

Sunny slightly frowned and said:

"Great. One more thing: if you break our agreement and simply fly away, I will find and kill you. This is not a threat, just facts. Do you understand?"

Kai lingered for a bit before answering.

"Yeah, no problem."

Sunny gazed into the black cavern of the well and hesitated. He was more or less sure that Kai was human, but had to be prepared to act immediately in case he was not.

Following his silent command, the Stone Saint came out of the shadows and kneeled near the well, grasping the grate with her hands. The steel of her gauntlets scraped against the ornate iron, and with some visible effort, she slowly moved the heavy grate to the side.

Sunny shivered as he listened to the wrenching sound of iron grinding against stone. The Midnight Shard appeared in his hands, and he lowered himself into a combat stance with grim resolve.

Whatever came out of the well, he was ready to face it.

A few seconds passed, each feeling like an eternity. Sunny was tensely staring into the circle of pure darkness in front of him, waiting to see if he was right to trust the prisoner of the well or not.

Then, several more seconds passed.

…And then a few more.

Nothing happened.

'Uh…'

Sunny tilted his head, then asked with some irritation:

"Aren't you going to come up?"

After a bit of a delay, the charming voice resounded from the darkness once more:

"...You see, I just thought of something."

Sunny sighed and lowered his sword a little.

"What is it?"

Kai was silent for some time, then answered with a bit of wariness:

"Ah, it's just that this grate is so heavy that it wouldn't even budge when I tried to move it. It took all six of my captors to put it in place, actually. And they were all big, strong men. So…"

He hesitated.

"I know that we have already established that we are both human, and it's not that I doubt your honesty, but would you mind explaining to me how is it that you were able to remove it all by yourself?"

The honorifics were back.

Sunny cursed under his breath. This guy was even more paranoid than him!

He was unwilling to reveal his hidden ace to Kai, but the cautious prisoner left him with no other choice. Glancing at the Shadow Saint with a dark expression, Sunny said:

"That thing is too heavy for me, too. But I was lucky enough to get a

very strong Echo."

Kai seemed to suddenly become very curious.

"Oh? That is indeed lucky! Very few people in the castle have an Echo. I think I know every one of them by name."

After a short pause, he added:

"...By the way, what is your name?"

Sunny rolled his eyes and said through gritted teeth:

"My name is Sunless."

This conversation was entering dangerous waters. Depending on what Kai was going to say next, Sunny might be forced to climb into the well after all.

Not to save the young man with a beautiful voice, but to silence him forever.

Meanwhile, Kai suddenly laughed.

"Sunless? That name does not sound like something only a soul-devouring demon would be called at all! Zero chance of that, right?"

After saying that, he laughed again, this time with a hint of desperation in his voice.

However, even then Kai's laugh was very pleasant to the ear. More pleasant than his charming voice, even, but Sunny was in no mood to appreciate its melodious sound.

'Goddammit!'

Sunny rubbed his temples. Why didn't anyone ever trust him? He was such an honest young man! The most honest young man in the world, really.

Annoyed, he said in a flat tone:

"Very funny. Now, come out of that well before I change my mind."

Eventually, Kai stopped laughing and said:

"There's no one in the castle with that name. At least no one with an Echo under their command. Do you maybe live in the outer settlement?"

'Oh, come on!'

Feeling the pressure of the Flaw growing in his mind, Sunny closed his eyes and answered truthfully:

"No."

Kai cleared his throat.

"So… you are someone who walks the cursed ruins alone at night, possesses the strength of at least six men, dwells in the darkness beyond the castle walls, and calls himself Sunless. Did I miss anything?"

Sunny grimaced.

"Not really."

For a few moments, there was silence. Then, the prisoner of the well said with a voice full of dark humor:

"Would you climb out of this well to meet a creature like that?"

Hidden in the darkness of the cursed night, Sunny smiled with a bit of menace and said.

"If I was in your shoes, I would. And I think that you should do it, too. Do you know why?"

After a small pause, Kai asked with sincere interest:

"Why?"

Sunny stopped smiling and allowed a cold indifference to seep into his voice:

"Because I can put that grate back anytime."

Without waiting for Kai's response, he ordered the Stone Saint to move the grate a little. A moment later, the horrid sound of iron scraping against stones invaded his ears once again.

Almost immediately, the prisoner of the well changed his tune:

"Uh… alright! Wait! Stop!"

The Shadow Saint released the grate, allowing silence to reign over the lonesome courtyard once again.

Kai was quiet for some time, and then said with dejected reluctance:

"...You'd better not be a demon, alright? Stand clear, I'm coming out."

Chapter-117: Cruel Injustice

Sunny felt a soft breeze lightly caress his cheeks, and then something moved in the darkness of the well.

Gripping the hilt of the Midnight Shard tightly, he prepared for the worst. On the other side of the dark fissure, Shadow Saint slowly raised her shield and rested the blade of her sword on its rim.

…However, they had nothing to fear.

A few moments later, a graceful figure appeared in the air, rose above the well, and then gently landed on the stones in front of it.

The corner of Sunny's mouth twitched. The owner of the charming voice was, indeed, human. It was a young man wearing a light lamellar armor, with luscious dark auburn hair and mesmerizing green eyes. His well-fitted armor was made out of burnished brown leather, with deep blue embroidered garments beneath.

However, for a moment, he wished that Kai actually turned out to be a demon.

Because the damn guy not only possessed the most charming voice he had ever heard, but was also drop-dead gorgeous.

Honestly, it was simply unfair!

Kai was tall, slender, and incredibly handsome. His face was small, perfectly shaped and beautiful, with high cheekbones and flawless ivory skin. His green eyes were nothing short of electric, and his lips were soft and full like… uh…

'W—what am I thinking?'

What's more, he seemed to possess that special type of warm charm

that made some people almost irresistibly attractive. Sunny wouldn't be surprised to find out that droves of girls simply fell to Kai's feet every time he happened to casually walk by. Perhaps a few guys, too.

Even worse still, the bastard looked like a genuinely nice person, without the smallest trace of arrogance or entitlement on his pretty face. There were playful sparks of humor hiding deep within his eyes, and one could be absolutely sure that when Kai smiled, cute dimples would appear on his cheeks.

You couldn't even hate the damn guy!

Two weeks spent in the deep dark pit did nothing to lessen his glamour, too.

In short, Kai was the most beautiful person Sunny had ever seen, even compared to other Awakened. He looked like one of those screen idols that people loved to obsess over, only somehow even more attractive in person.

Sunny glanced at himself, feeling a strong desire to grind his teeth in outrage.

'Well, this is just… a cruel injustice, simple as that.'

Meanwhile, Kai noticed the Shadow Saint's burning ruby eyes, which were the only source of light in the absolute darkness of the night, and flinched back with a paled expression on his face.

"Oh no! It's a demon after all!"

Sunny got distracted from his self-pity and blinked. Then, feeling somewhat spiteful, he said:

"I'm behind you, idiot."

Kai froze, then slowly turned around to face him. Sunny didn't fail to notice that the young man held one of his hands out, obviously ready to summon whatever Memory he used as a weapon.

Blinded by darkness, Kai couldn't see him, of course.

'Well, good. Let's not let this fellow know that I'm not as, uh... good-looking as he is for a few more moments.'

Pretending to be perfectly composed, Sunny asked in a calm voice:

"Haven't I told you that I had an Echo? It's her over there. Well, sort of. That is to say, those aren't my eyes."

The handsome Sleeper hesitated for a few seconds, then said:

"Sunless? You really are a human?"

Up until that moment, both of them were just disembodied voices to each other. But now, while Sunny had already made sure that Kai was not some ancient horror… or at least didn't look like one… the former prisoner of the well was still in the dark, both literally and figuratively.

"Last time I checked, I was still human, yes. If you have a Memory to produce light, you can summon it and see for yourself."

Kai lingered.

"Won't the Nightmare Creatures be attracted by the light?"

'Smart and cautious. I like him.'

Sunny shook his head.

"Usually, they would, by this courtyard is really secluded. Plus, there are not a lot of monsters in this area. I guess that's why those thugs chose this particular place to keep you imprisoned."

With a sigh of relief, Kai summoned a paper lantern that glowed with soft yellow light. Sunny hissed.

"Argh! Damn!"

Relying on Shadow Sense to keep track of the young man's movements, he raised a hand and covered his eyes. Accustomed to the darkness, they weren't ready for such a sudden appearance of light.

Of course, Sunny knew that this would happen. He allowed himself to be momentarily blinded to give Kai some sense of safety and better convince him of his human nature.

"Oh! Sorry."

The beautiful young man lowered the lantern a little and looked up, trying to finally lay eyes on his mysterious liberator.

Then, with a bit of surprise, he slightly lowered his head and looked down.

'Great, that is not humiliating at all!'

Kai stared at Sunny for a few seconds and, after realizing that he was indeed a human, offered him a dazzling smile.

His smile was as charming as the rest of him. Even the cute dimples that Sunny had imagined would inevitably appear on his cheeks were, indeed, there in all their glory.

It was nothing short of obnoxious.

"Well... what a surprise! I was almost certain that you will turn out to be a terrible monster. But you aren't. You really are a human, and such a cutie too!"

Sunny coughed.

'Wha… did he just call me a "cutie"? How dare he! Uh, I mean… thanks? What is happening?'

Meanwhile, Kai frowned.

"But, Sunless…"

"What?!"

The beautiful Sleeper blinked a couple of times.

"Can I ask something? If you really don't live in the castle or in the outer settlement, then where do you live?"

Sunny shrugged.

"I mean, are there many options left? I live in the city."

Kai hesitated for a bit, but then, suddenly, a light of realization ignited in his mesmerizing green eyes.

"Oh! I think I've heard of you! Aren't you that crazy kid that lives alone in the ruins?"

Sunny stared at him with murder in his eyes.

'Why does everyone keeps calling me "kid"? Why does everyone keep calling me "crazy"?! I'm not crazy!'

With a deep sigh, he answered:

"Indeed, that's me. You can call me Sunny, by the way. Once you get to know me better, you'll realize that I am not, in fact, that crazy."

Kai looked at him with doubt. Noticing that, Sunny grinned. He decided to tease the obnoxiously gorgeous young man a little.

Of course, with the limitations of his Flaw, that was going to require a bit of finesse.

Putting too much enthusiasm in his voice, Sunny said:

"And I don't actually live alone! I have plenty of creatures to keep me company, you might even call them my friends. There's a talking rock that sometimes tells me to do stuff. There's also my shadow, it has a lot of interesting opinions!"

He stared at Kai with a sincere smile. When the young man's handsome face became a little pale, Sunny laughed.

"Gee, relax, man. I am just joking around with you."

Then he looked down at the shadow and added in a dark, angry tone:

"They're not really my friends. I actually can't stand that rock, and the shadow and I barely talk these days..."

Chapter-118: Mirror Image

Perhaps joking around with Kai was a bit cruel, but Sunny was really annoyed by how ridiculously good-looking the other Sleeper was. Plus, he had not talked to another human in such a long time that his already lacking communication skills had become truly rusty.

Since they were going to visit the castle soon, Sunny had to prepare himself for the inevitable moment when he would be forced to talk to strangers. Stretching his Flaw to its limits was a good practice. He wouldn't want for something like… that accident to happen again.

The unpleasant memory soured Sunny's mood.

Meanwhile, Kai was staring at him with a very strange expression on his face. Sunny cleared his throat.

"Uh… that was a part of the joke, by the way."

The handsome young man continued to stare, his face full of doubt.

'Did I go too hard on this poor guy? He must have been scared out of his wits already… he's probably in an utter panic now. Who wouldn't be a bit apprehensive about meeting a madman? Yeah… maybe it wasn't as funny as I thought.'

Kai cautiously shook his head.

"It's not that. I just feel like I have to inform you about something."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah? About what?"

Kai hesitated, then said in a very calming tone:

"It's about my Flaw. I can actually tell when someone is lying to me.

So, uh… when you said that there's a rock that tells you what to do, I knew that it was true right away."

Sunny glared at the beautiful young man with an incredulous expression. Internally, he didn't know whether to laugh or to cry.

'Flaw? How is that a Flaw?! That's a damn superpower, you despicable bastard!'

Why was that Kai so lucky? He had the charming voice, the tall stature, the perfect face. Even his Flaw was a damn blessing!

Coincidentally, it was also a perfect counter to the better half of Sunny's tricks. If Kai had not informed him about this strange Flaw of his, Sunny would have gotten himself into really big trouble pretty soon.

Luckily, the beautiful young man happened to be a very honest guy.

'What an angel!'

While Sunny was seething in outrage, Kai said in a gentle tone:

"So Sunny… what exactly does that rock ask you to do? Do you maybe want to tell me?"

Sunny sighed.

'I'll have to be really, really careful and watch what I say around this guy. '

"Well, you're no fun at all. The talking rock is actually a Memory capable of repeating words. I use it as an alarm occasionally, so it mainly tells me to wake up. As for that stuff I told about my shadow being opinionated… that's also true. Uh, but you already know, I suppose. My shadow has a bit of personality due to its function within my Aspect."

Kai thought about it, then smiled.

"Oh, I see! So it was really a joke. Very crafty. Sorry to ruin it with my Flaw."

Sunny scowled.

"Don't you patronize me…"

Then he stopped, thought about something, and said angrily:

"Wait, if you can tell when someone is lying, then why did I have to spend half an hour convincing you to get out of that well?!"

Kai blinked a couple of times, looking innocent and hurt.

"Well, how do I know if my Flaw works on Nightmare Creatures? I've never had a conversation with one before! A person can never be too careful when making deals with ancient horrors, you know."

Sunny covered his face with a hand.

"Yeah, I know."

Kai looked at him with concern.

"Ah, Sunny? Are you alright?"

'This is those cursed strings of fate screwing with me again. What are the odds of meeting a person whose Flaw is almost the exact opposite of mine? And why is he so goddamn stunning… is that supposed to be the opposite of how I look, huh? Huh?!'

"I am. Anyway. Let's get down to business."

Kai sighed.

"Of course. A promise is a promise. I will help you do whatever it is you want to do in the castle. Shall we go together?"

Sunny shook his head.

"Not yet. I'll have to stop by a place first. Do you know the big ruined cathedral to the south of here?"

The other Sleeper thought for a bit, then nodded.

"I think I do. I fly over that part of the city often, and it's hard to

miss. Are you taking me there?"

'Good question…'

On one hand, Sunny didn't want anyone to know where he lived. On the other hand, he didn't trust Kai enough to simply let him return to the castle and wait there.

But moving through the city with a source of light was not something he was prepared to do, either.

Was there a compromise?

"I can't take you anywhere with that lantern of yours. I survive by hiding in the darkness, remember? So you can go on and fly to the cathedral on your own. Wait for me on the roof."

Kai looked south, remembering the location of the ruined temple, and nodded.

"Alright."

Sunny raised a hand, stopping the young man from flying away.

"Wait. Whatever happens, don't go inside the cathedral, okay? I'm not joking. There's a Fallen Devil residing inside, so if you do, he'll butcher you just like he had butchered that bunch of idiots who had kidnapped you."

Kai stared at him in shock.

"What? They are dead?"

Sunny shrugged.

"How do you think I found you in that well? One of the dead thugs had a map on his body. I thought there'll be treasure hidden in the marked location. But…"

The beautiful Sleeper smiled.

"But it was something much better? Aw, thank you for the

compliment! I'll be careful not to enter the cathedral, rest assured."

Sunny stared at the smiling Kai for some time, then shrugged in exasperation.

"Sure. Off you go, then. And remember — if you break our agreement, I will…"

"...find and kill me, yeah. Don't worry, Sunny. I never break a promise!"

With these words, Kai raised his head and looked up. A soft gust of wind touched Sunny's skin, and in the next moment, the charming Sleeper suddenly soared above the ground, quickly disappearing into the sky. Soon, only a tiny dot of his paper lantern could be seen, moving south through the black skies like a lonely star.

Suddenly, Sunny trembled.

A cold feeling of dread grasped his heart like an iron grip.

Following the dot of light with his eyes, he whispered:

"...There was a lonely star burning in the black skies, and under its light, the castle was suddenly consumed by fire, with rivers of blood flowing down its halls."

He stood for a while in the darkness, motionless.

If Sunny didn't know better, he would have thought that this part of Cassie's prophecy talked about Kai.

But he did know better.

He had known the truth of that prophecy for some time now.

Lowering his head, Sunny licked his lips and asked the voiceless shadow in a raspy voice:

"Is it… is it already starting?"

Like always, the shadow did not answer.

'What a stupid question.'

Of course not. It had started a long time ago.

Right at the moment when the three of them had entered the ruined city.

Chapter-119: A Fistful of Soul Shards

It took Sunny some time to find his way back to the cathedral. With the approach of the dawn, the Nightmare Creatures that hunted at night grew restless. He had to be especially careful as he lurked through the narrow streets, keeping to the darkest patches of shadow.

Even though there was no moon or stars in the lightless night of the Forgotten Shore, many of the monsters here had their own ways of perceiving shapes moving through the darkness. Their ability to see in the dark was somewhat offset by Sunny's [Child of Shadows] Attribute, which allowed him to become indistinguishable from any shadow that he dove in.

However, he still had to be cautious. In this cursed place, nothing was ever certain — except for danger, death, and terror.

Some time later, he climbed the familiar pillars of the cathedral and appeared on its vast roof. Walking on the wide ridge separating two slanting expanses of ancient tiles, he approached Kai, who was standing nervously some distance away.

The beautiful young man was grasping a longbow made of horn in his hands, staring into the darkness with a tense expression on his pale face. Sunny stopped a few steps away from him and looked at that bow for a long time.

'There's not much time left.'

To avoid getting an arrow between his eyes, Sunny decided to announce his arrival with a gentle greeting:

"Hey, Kai. I'm here."

The archer turned around with a startled expression and raised a hand, as though trying to summon his lantern. However, he thought better of it, afraid to attract unwanted attention. Instead, Kai gulped and whispered:

"Lower your voice! What if that Fallen Devil hears us?"

Sunny blinked.

'Oh, right. He's a very carefull person.'

Which was a great personality trait to have, as far as he was concerned. The more paranoid, the better. Smiling inwardly, he said:

"Relax, he won't."

Kai stared at him with doubt, then asked:

"Are you sure?"

Sunny gave him a nod.

"Yes."

He was prepared to explain the reason behind this confidence, but, surprisingly, Kai immediately believed him and calmed down.

'Right… he knows when people are lying to him. Which means that he also knows when they're telling the truth. And since I can only tell the truth, he can pretty much believe everything I say without the need to ask unnecessary questions.'

Huh… come to think of it, that Flaw of his was actually very convenient.

Meanwhile, Kai cautiously looked around and asked:

"So, what are we going to do here?"

Sunny gestured at the group of shattered tiles not too far away from them and answered in a calm tone:

"I'm going to climb into that hole and retrieve something from the

temple. You just wait here until I return."

Kai's eyes widened.

"Are you crazy? What about the devil?"

What about that bastard? Sunny couldn't help but fantasize about slaughtering the damn creature for a few seconds.

'The day will come!'

Returning to the present situation, he said:

"What about him? I told you, I'm good at hiding. As long as I know who I'm dealing with, they won't be able to notice me unless I want them to."

He had learned that first part of the sentence the hard way. Actually, it was the bastard who taught him that even concealment of shadows had its limits. That's how Sunny ended up with his insides on his outside and in possession of this vital piece of information.

Some lessons you only needed to receive once to remember them forever.

Kai was looking at him with a strange expression again. Sunny frowned:

"What?"

The beautiful young man shook his head.

"No, no. It's just that… it's an awesome Ability. I wish I had an Ability like that, to be honest."

Sunny glared at him and uttered through gritted teeth:

"Says the guy who can fly! Why would you want to hide your perfectly symmetrical face anyway? Tired of being ogled by love-stricken supermodels?!"

Kai sighed.

"Something like that. How did you know?"

Sunny opened his mouth, then closed it again.

"...Anyway, wait for me here. I won't be long."

Throwing a glance at the charming Sleeper, he shook his head and walked over to the hole hidden behind several broken tiles.

Soon, he was back in his secret lair. Looking around with a bit of apprehension, Sunny sighed and removed the rucksack fashioned from the skin of a monster from his back. Then, he unloaded the strips of carapace centurion's meat on the silver plate and walked over to the iron chest.

To be honest, he really didn't want to go anywhere near the castle. The idea alone made him long to stay in this dark, quiet, familiar room forever. But he couldn't. If he wanted to make the Shadow Saint stronger, he had to return to the human settlement and risk facing his fears.

'Whatever. I'll just go in and out. Kai will be the one doing all the work, anyway.'

With a heavy sigh, he raised the lid of the chest and began loading his rucksack with soul shards. Dozens of beautiful crystals were soon glittering inside.

Sunny only took half of them, but the amount was already enough to drive many people to murder.

He couldn't really blame them. On the Forgotten Shore, shards represented money, and money represented life. Without it, you couldn't buy yourself a place within the safety of the castle or procure food without having to risk death in the cursed maze of the city.

Anyone would be willing to commit murder in order to survive.

'Keep telling yourself this.'

With an angry grimace, Sunny shut the rucksack tightly, made sure that no light seeped through its seams, and turned around.

Glancing at his peaceful hidden lair one last time, he shut his eyes for a moment, and then walked away without looking back.

It was time to return to the castle.

…And all the terrible memories he had left there before running away.

Chapter-120: Approaching the Castle

Washed in the ghostly light of the nascent dawn, Sunny and Kai were walking through the ruins of the cursed city. The night was slowly crawling away. Its retreat made one of them feel safer, while the other one grew uneasy without the familiar veil of darkness hiding him from the world.

'I have almost forgotten how mournful this place looks when the sun is up.'

Somewhere in the distance, the waves of the dark sea were halting their eternal assault on the stone walls of the ancient city. These walls had withstood thousands of years of wear and abuse without allowing even a single drop of black water to seep through. Sunny suspected that they would stand unbroken for a thousand years more.

Suddenly uncomfortable, he turned his head west and found the distant silhouette of the Crimson Spire. The menacing structure was looming over the Forgotten Shore like an evil omen, spelling doom to anyone who would dare approach it.

'...Maybe not.'

Sunny had chosen a complicated and meandering route to reach the castle. Kai, who was less familiar with the cursed city, simply followed behind. The charming young man was alert and collected, his bow ready to send arrows flying at any moment.

They had to circle around many areas where especially terrifying creatures were known to dwell and hunt, making slow progress. Still, it was better to be safe than sorry.

At some point, Sunny raised his hand, gesturing for his companion to

stop. He peered into the distance with a deep frown on his face.

Kai glanced at him and whispered:

"What is it?"

Sunny brought a finger to his lips before answering:

"Shh. Listen."

Soon, they heard an eerie sound that resembled stifled, heart-wrenching weeping. It was as though there was a crying woman in the fog ahead of them, slowly drawing closer. Her trembling sobs made both Sleepers shiver.

Kai looked at him and asked without much confidence:

"What are the chances that it's actually a human girl?"

Sunny gave him a crooked smile.

"Low."

Without needing to discuss it, they hid behind a large pile of rubble and waited. Pressing himself against the cold stones, Sunny sent his shadow to climb the building and observe the surrounding streets. Kai saw the shadow off with a bewildered look, blinked a couple of times, but didn't say anything.

A minute or two later, Sunny glanced at him and asked:

"Where are your arrows?"

The charming young man hesitated, then said:

"I usually carry a quiver with a few dozen arrows that were specially crafted for me by one of the best blacksmiths in the castle. But the gentlemen who put me in that well… may they rest in peace… weren't kind enough to let me bring it."

Sunny gave him an amused look.

"So that bow of yours is actually useless?"

Kai lingered for a few moments before answering:

"...I also have arrow-type Memories."

"How many?"

The elegant archer lowered his gaze in embarrassment.

"Uh… two. Will that be enough?"

Sunny was silent for a bit, and then answered in a flat tone:

"No. I don't think that will be enough."

Out there in the fog, his shadow was looking at the creature that had been producing the heart-wrenching weeping.

It was not a human girl.

A massive, four-legged beast was walking through the morning mist. Its flesh was rotten and emaciated, hanging from the bones like a tattered coat. Sunny could clearly see the white arcs of its ribs through the holes in the rotting hide, the unnatural darkness hiding behind them, and the powerful jaws of the partially bared dog-like skull that were full of terrifying teeth.

One didn't have to be a genius to understand that the horrid creature was one of the Fallen masters of the ruined city.

As he was looking, the beast opened its maw and produced another long, human-like sob, then stopped and listened, as though waiting for an answer. When nothing happened, it lowered its head and slowly continued on its way.

Luckily, although their hiding spot was somewhat close, it wasn't actually on its path. If nothing changed, the Fallen would walk past without even noticing them. They just had to wait.

Sunny sighed.

"We'll have to stay here for ten minutes, at least. Get comfortable."

Once again, Kai didn't ask anything, simply taking Sunny's word for it. It seemed as though his strange ability to sense lies made the charming Sleeper less prone to having a lot of questions.

Which was a wonderful quality to have, as far as Sunny was concerned.

With nothing to do but wait, they had a bit of time to rest and catch their breaths. Sunny summoned the Endless Spring and took a few sips of cold, sweet water. Noticing that Kai was staring at him, he hesitated, then passed him the beautiful glass bottle.

The charming young man drank greedily, as though someone dying from thirst. Come to think of it…

Feeling a little guilty, Sunny asked:

"When was the last time they gave you water?"

Kai detached himself from the bottle, wiped his lips, and smiled in pure delight.

"Ah. Two or three days ago, I think. Thank you kindly!"

He returned the bottle and looked at Sunny with curiosity.

"Hey, Sunny. Can I ask you something?"

Sunny tensed up and gave the charming archer a dark look.

"You can."

His eyes, however, hinted that he shouldn't.

But Kai either didn't notice the menacing glare or wasn't bothered by it.

"You came to the Forgotten Shore this last solstice, right?"

"Yeah."

Sunny held his breath, guessing what the beautiful Sleeper was going to ask him. How they had survived in the Labyrinth? Why he had

abandoned the castle? How he had survived in the ruins? Each of these questions could potentially lead to a disaster.

Kai leaned forward with excitement in his eyes, hesitated for a second, and then said:

"What… what's the top music video in the charts out there right now?"

Sunny blinked.

'Uh… what?'

That was absolutely not what he had expected to hear. Noticing that the charming young man was staring at him with anticipation, he shifted and answered with a bit of uncertainty:

"That… uh… I have no idea."

Kai sighed, clearly disappointed, but then suddenly smiled again.

The smile was wide and dazzling.

"...Can I ask you another question?"

Chapter-121: Graveyard of Hope

In the next ten minutes, the foundations of Sunny's worldview were shaken to the core. Kai had drowned him in a torrent of questions… all of which had nothing to do with anything even remotely important!

What interested the charming Sleeper were very strange things like what types of shoes were in fashion, which celebrity wore what to some pompous award ceremony, who of them had a scandal and what was that scandal about, what was the latest dance craze, and so on.

He was endlessly curious about that type of stupid crap and absolutely indifferent about all of Sunny's dark secrets.

It was almost insulting.

What's worse, Sunny felt like a complete fool because he couldn't provide even a single answer. What did he know about fashion and high culture? Nothing!

After a while, Kai's enthusiasm had waned. Looking at Sunny with a comically disheartened face, he sighed and gently asked one last question:

"Sunny, tell me honestly… were you a hikikomori in the real world as well?"

Sunny blinked.

'What is this fool talking about?'

"A hik… a what?"

Kai cleared his throat and offered him an apologetic smile.

"Ah, you know… a recluse? A shut-in? Someone who lives under a rock?"

Sunny stared at the gorgeous young man, feeling like the world completely stopped making any sense ever since they had met.

"What are you talking about? Why would I live under a rock? You would freeze to death! I lived in a cargo container once, but it had four walls and a roof, at least…"

Kai sighed one more time and turned away.

"I see. Well, sorry to bother you. It's just that I've been stuck in this place for about two and a half years now, and life here is so monotone."

His beautiful profile was radiating melancholy and sadness, as though Kai was lamenting something serious, as opposed to utter rubbish.

'Two and half years… that dimwit survived here for two and a half years?'

Sunny was surprised to hear that. Kai seemed like a nice guy, but not exactly someone well suited for the ruthless nightmare of the Forgotten Shore. Perhaps he had underestimated the charming Sleeper… or perhaps there was another, much simpler reason.

Sunny frowned.

There was a group of people who tended to live here the longest. Suddenly suspicious, he asked in a cold tone:

"Are you a part of Gunlaug's gang?"

Kai looked at him with surprise.

Then, he chortled.

"Gods, no! If there's one thing I absolutely despise, it's bullies like him. I would rather die than become one of Gunlaug's minions. Plus, the man has no style. That armor of his is the most hideous thing I have ever seen!"

However, after saying that, he suddenly grew quiet and added after a few seconds in a dejected voice:

"But I do accept jobs from his lieutenants from time to time. That is the reason why he tolerates my existence, so I don't really have a choice."

Sunny hesitated for a bit, but then decided that he believed the other Sleeper. He really didn't look like one of Gunlaug's thugs. Besides, if he had been one of them, no sane person would have dared to kidnap and imprison him. Members of Gunlaug's cohort were nearly untouchable.

Which meant that Kai was, indeed, much more capable than Sunny had given him credit for.

'Interesting.'

Noticing that the eerie sobs of the Fallen beast had grown sufficiently distant, he shifted his perspective to the shadow and made sure that the terrible creature was already far away.

Standing up, Sunny dismissed the glass bottle and said:

"We're safe now. Time to move."

Once they were ready to leave, he summoned the shadow back and prepared to take the first step forward. However, then Sunny suddenly stopped and glanced at the charming young archer with hesitation.

"Hey, Kai. Can I ask you a question as well?"

The older Sleeper smiled, honesty and eagerness written all over his face.

"Of course!"

Sunny was silent for a couple of seconds, then said in a strange voice:

"That armor of yours… do you wear it because it's the best one you could get, or because it looks good?"

Kai looked at him with confusion. Raising one exquisite eyebrow, he said:

"I don't understand the question. Is there a difference?"

Sunny closed his eyes, sighed, and turned away.

"Never mind. Let's go."

As the sun rose above the horizon, they went deeper into the city, slowly approaching its center.

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The castle stood on a tall hill in the middle of the cursed city. It was grand and magnificent, with dozens of towers rising into the air, each supported by a number of elaborate arches and columns. Grotesque gargoyles were staring down on the ruins from under the eaves.

The road leading to the castle was as impressive as the castle itself. It was narrow and heavily fortified, circling the hill in a way that allowed the defenders of the castle to endlessly rain arrows down on any possible attacker.

At the end of the road, a grandiose staircase led to the gates of the castle. In front of it, there had once been a vast stone platform, meant to serve as the gathering ground for the soldiers in case the enemy was to somehow breach all but this one last line of defense.

Now, the platform had turned into a makeshift settlement, with small shabby buildings made out of stone, wood, and anything else the inhabitants of this slum could get their hands on standing chaotically here and there, forming messy groups and narrow alleys.

This place did not look like the outskirts where Sunny had grown up, but it had the same unmistakable air of misery, fear, and desperation.

As the two of them approached the outer settlement, several Sleepers greeted Kai with friendly smiles.

"Hey, Night! Glad to see you, man. Where have you been lately?"

Kai smiled in embarrassment.

"Ah, you know. Flying around. What about you, pal?"

While the charming young man was exchanging pleasantries with his acquaintance, Sunny cautiously looked around.

The place had imperceptibly changed since the last time he was here. The settlement itself seemed to be almost the same, with just a few buildings slightly changing shapes. The people, however… people somehow seemed more energized and confident, as though the ever-present fear of death and starvation was not as pressing anymore.

However, there was a strange sense of tension in the air.

'I guess she was busy in these three months, too.'

Finally managing to end the conversation, Kai turned to him and smiled apologetically.

"Sorry about that."

Sunny frowned.

"Why are they calling you Night?"

The charming young man stared at him, then cleared his throat and said with a bit of strangeness in his voice.

"Oh, you really don't know. Well… it's a nickname of sorts. Nightingale, that's how I am known around these parts."

'What a stupid nickname,' Sunny thought, and decided to get things done as quickly as possible.

He couldn't wait to leave this depressing place.

"Alright, since we're here, time to make good on your promise."

Kai gave him a nod.

"Sure. What do you need me to do?"

Sunny looked around, making sure that no one could hear them, and said:

"It's simple. Go into the castle and find out about who is selling Memories, and what the price is. Then come back and report to me."

His companion blinked a couple of times, clearly surprised, then shrugged.

"No problem. But it's going to take a while. If you want the best information possible, of course."

Sunny grimaced.

"Do as you see fit. I'll be waiting for you in that alley over there."

Kai looked at him one last time, smiled, and walked away.

Feeling nervous and tense, Sunny walked over to a secluded alley and rested his back against the wall. He tried to become as small and unnoticeable as possible.

Being here was making his skin crawl. Maybe his decision to come back was a mistake, after all. Maybe he should simply turn around and walk away.

However, he didn't. Deep down inside, he knew that he had to take this opportunity to gather as many Memories as possible, so that his Shadow could become stronger as fast as possible.

Perhaps he would never get this opportunity again.

Time slowly passed. An hour went by, then another. Kai was certainly taking his sweet time gathering the information Sunny had asked from him.

However, nothing bad had happened. Yet.

Sunny was almost starting to believe that he was nervous for nothing, but then, of course, the thing he dreaded the most became a reality.

A calm, painfully familiar voice suddenly resounded from somewhere

behind him.

"Hi, Sunny."

He froze, feeling like a beast caught in a trap, and then slowly turned around. A strange, complicated expression appeared on his face.

Forcing out a smile, Sunny licked his suddenly dry lips and said:

"...Hey, Neph. Long time no see."

Chapter-122: Four Months Ago

Nephis changed a lot since the last time Sunny had seen her.

Outwardly, she looked almost the same — tall, firm, and strangely distant, as though existing slightly apart from the rest of the world. She was still wearing the Starlight Legion Armor, which accentuated the graceful lines of her slender, lithe body. Only now, there was also a white cloak draped over her shoulders, close in color to the pristine metal of the elegant plate armor.

Changing Star's silver hair was much longer now, almost reaching her shoulders. Without the short tomboyish cut, she looked strangely mature and feminine, making Sunny's heart beat a little faster. Her calm grey eyes were as striking as ever.

The true changes, however, hid much deeper. Perhaps only a person who knew her as well as Sunny did could notice them, or perhaps it was precisely because he had come to know her so well that the veil of detached indifference shrouding her true self cracked, revealing the deeper feelings beneath.

Nephis seemed to be much more alive now, much more present. Her eyes shined with resolve and determination, radiating an almost infectious feeling of temperate confidence.

…This was her power. The power of conviction.

Sunny shivered under that gaze.

Neph was the person he longed to see the most and, at the same time, hoped to never see again. She was the true reason why he had to leave the castle.

Stirred awake by this fated meeting, a torrent of memories rose to the surface of his mind.

If only he had known at the time…

Well, it would not have changed anything, really.

***

Four months ago, on the night that they had ventured into the cursed sea on a boat made of demon's bones, Sunny was shivering in the wind.

…After an eternity spent in the cold embrace of darkness, the endless night of their escape was finally drawing its last breaths. He shifted and turned to the east, where a ghostly line of pale lilac appeared over the horizon.

Trembling, he licked his lips and said in a raspy voice:

"Cas. Cassie. It's morning."

After he uttered these words, the last remnant of strength that had kept Sunny going disappeared, and he slumped on the stones, his chest rising heavily and then falling.

A new dawn was ready to bathe the desolate hell of the Forgotten Shore in warm sunlight. They had survived.

The three Sleepers were perched on a giant stone hand that protruded from the black waves, as if held above the lightless abyss by a goddess. Sunny and Cassie were holding each other for warmth, while Nephis was lying in the center of the stone palm, still unconscious. Visible through the gaps in the shattered armor, her ivory skin was pale and listless.

'We did it.'

They had escaped the clutches of Soul Devourer, sailed through the cursed darkness, and even lived through a battle with the horrifying dweller of the depths… by some miracle.

Sunny couldn't quite believe that they had actually managed to pull their daring escape off. From the moment he had learned about the enthrallment hex put onto their minds by the ancient fiend, he felt

that the chances of ever saving themselves from the gluttonous evil tree were more than slim. Perhaps because it had taken away his most dangerous and tested weapon... his mind.

And yet, somehow, they had succeeded.

Utterly exhausted, Sunny closed his eyes and listened to the dark sea as it retreated to hide from the coming sun. Without even noticing it, he slipped into the embrace of sleep.

When he awoke, the sun was already high in the sky. Sunny expected to feel crippled now that adrenalin had left his battered body, but, to his surprise, he wasn't in even half as much pain as he had anticipated. Blood Weave was truly a miraculous Attribute to have for someone as prone to disasters as he was.

Even his broken finger wasn't hurting that much anymore.

Sunny still had to groan while sitting up, though.

Cassie was sleeping by his side, as drained by the events of the previous night as he was… perhaps even more so. Her delicate face seemed vulnerable and pale, twisted in an anxious frown. Sunny sighed.

Nephis had yet to regain her senses. At some time while he slept, the blind girl had used her cloak to cover Changing Star, helping her to preserve some warmth. Neph lay still and motionless, her face drained of all color. Only the quiet sound of her breathing told Sunny that she was still alive.

He trembled, remembering the harrowing sight of her mangled flesh restoring itself in the crucible of purifying flame. Unleashing that flame always took a heavy toll on Nephis, bringing her unimaginable pain and suffering. Who knew what price she had paid to pull herself away from the doors of oblivion? He had not even realized before that she could use it to heal herself.

Perhaps there was a reason why she had never done so in the past. Only time could tell.

'It's time to assess the situation.'

Turning away from Changing Star, Sunny looked around, trying to discern their current circumstances. His heart was heavy.

If they had survived the attack of the tentacle monster and the ensuing shipwreck only to find themselves stranded in the middle of the cursed sea, with no way to continue forward, that would be a truly macabre twist of fate.

To the east of them, there was nothing but the empty expanse of the colossal crater. Same thing for the…

Sunny froze, noticing a dark line in the distance. That was… that was the western edge of the crater. They had almost crossed it!

Feeling a strange excitement grasping his heart, Sunny quickly turned around and looked west. His eyes widened.

For a few moments, his head was silent and empty. Then, a single thought appeared in it:

'We were so close…'

He sat quietly for a long time, forgetting about everything else. A few hours later, Cassie finally woke up. Feeling that he wasn't next to her anymore, she called in a frightened voice:

"Sunny?"

He licked his lips.

"I'm here."

Cassie sat up and stretched her hand out, finding his shoulder.

"Why… why do you sound so strange?"

Sunny blinked, then slowly turned his head to look at the blind girl. A tentative smile found its way onto his face.

"Cassie… we found it. We have found that city you saw."

***

In the end, Nephis had remained unconscious for two whole days.

Sunny was really starting to worry about her, but then, on the third day, Changing Star had finally come back to her senses. At the time, he was sitting on top of the giant hand's index finger, staring west with a warm, excited feeling in his heart.

They did it! They were finally going to go home!

Sunny couldn't wait to return to the real world. He didn't even care about becoming an Awakened and the corresponding leap in power and status that much anymore.

All he cared about was his soft bed, mountains of delicious food, and limitless hot showers.

Sunny lowered his head and glanced at Nephis, trying to determine if there was anything wrong with her. In the webtoons, one of the characters was bound to suffer from something like amnesia right before things were about to take a turn for the better.

But Changing Star seemed to be fine. She was still the same Neph he had known — tall, firm, and strangely distant, as though there was an invisible barrier separating her from the rest of the world. When the gaze of her striking grey eyes fell on him, Sunny felt his heart beating a little faster.

He smiled.

'Thank gods!'

Nephis frowned, lowered her head, and then asked in a flat tone:

"Why are you smiling?"

Realizing that he was grinning from ear to ear like a fool, Sunny blinked, then tried to shrug with false indifference.

'Abort, abort! Divert her attention!'

"Look behind you."

The sight of what lay in the west was one of the reasons for his good mood, so it wasn't that much of a stretch.

Neph stared at him for a few moments, then sighed and turned around.

Behind her, a tall city wall built of grey polished stone towered above the slopes of the colossal crater.

That wall was a sign that all their suffering was not in vain, and that all their dreams were about to come true.

It was hope.

Chapter-123: Helping Hand

Soon after Nephis had finally come back to her senses, they prepared to leave the shelter of the giant stone hand. The morning had just begun, so there was plenty of time to cross the remaining distance and climb out of the deep and vast crater. If all was going to go well, they would meet the next sunset on top of the tall wall of the mysterious city.

Of course, numerous things could go wrong between now and then. But, for some reason, Sunny felt optimistic.

This was a rare moment for his cynical, paranoid heart.

Just like before, Sunny and Neph took turns climbing down a few dozen meters and lowering Cassie to one another with the help of the golden rope. However, they had grown considerably stronger since the last time they had to do it.

Sunny remembered how tiresome it was to descend from the giant knight's statue in that way and chuckled. Now, he felt as though he could do it three times in a row, and considerably faster, too. Even though he had spent the last few days in an endless nightmare and brought his body to the point where it was about to shut down, now, there was nothing but resilient strength filling his muscles.

These two months that they had spent in the perilous hell of the crimson labyrinth, constantly fighting for their lives and slaying monsters that no Sleeper should ever face one after another, had made all three of them much more powerful.

Sunny doubted that a lot of Awakened had ever gone through this ruthless of an initiation and lived to tell the tale. Once he returned to the real world, he would most likely be considered one of the elite representatives of the current generation.

'Huh, that might actually be a problem.'

Well, he could always blame everything on Nephis. She was already close to being a mythical existence — the last daughter of the legendary Immortal Flame clan, one of the few Awakened in history who had managed to receive a True Name in the First Nightmare, the top student in her batch of Sleepers in the Academy, and so on.

People would easily believe that a prodigy like her had been able — and willing — to carry two pathetic weaklings on her back all the way to the Gateway.

Sunny just had to choose his words carefully when describing the events leading up to their triumphant return. Luckily, in that regard, he was a master.

Entertaining himself with such thoughts, he didn't even notice the flow of time. Soon, they were already approaching the ground.

Just before jumping into the soft black mud, Nephis looked at Sunny and said:

"Stay vigilant."

She didn't have to remind him. Sunny knew that the last stretch was often the most dangerous — mostly because it was natural for people to allow themselves to relax in these moments, falsely believing that the worst was already behind them. Numerous Awakened perished tragically with their goal already in sight.

He wasn't planning on becoming one of them.

Sunny carefully lowered Cassie down, watched as Neph helped her step out of the rope loop, and jumped down. He landed on the ground in a nimble roll, immediately jumped to his feet and outstretched one hand, ready to summon the Midnight Shard at a moment's notice.

However, nothing was trying to kill them.

Sunny and Nephis exchanged tense looks, and then slowly walked forward.

With each minute, the distant grey wall was growing closer.

At some point, Sunny gestured for Changing Star to stop and turned around, curious to take a look at the statue whose hand had saved them from drowning in the dark depths of the cursed sea.

Out there on the slope of the colossal crater, slightly tilted to the side, a giant statue of a slender woman dressed in a light flowing robe towered over the black mud. She was lovely and graceful, with a slim waist and delicate arms outstretched to the skies, as though trying to embrace them.

At least that was how she had looked once, a long time ago. Now, one of the arms was broken off, with only its shoulder remaining in place. Luckily, the other one was still there, and had served as a safe haven for the three Sleepers in their moment of desperate need.

Just as Sunny expected, there were seven shining stars carved into the stone surface of her robe.

What piqued his curiosity the most, though, was the fact that just like the giant knight, the graceful woman seemed to be missing her head. Once again, Sunny wondered if these stone titans were created without faces to begin with, or if something had beheaded them much later in a fit of destructive rage.

'...seven severed heads guarding seven seals,' he thought, remembering Cassie's frightening vision.

The mystery of that vision was nothing short of tantalizing. However, it seemed as though it was destined to remain unsolved — Sunny doubted that he would ever come back to this cursed place after returning to the real world.

There were many regions in the Dream Realm, and almost every one of them was far better than the hellish Forgotten Shore.

'To hell with all this crap!'

Sending silent gratitude to the statue that had saved their lives, Sunny turned around and headed west.

…As they approached the section of the slope that was almost vertical, something dangerous finally happened. Just as Sunny was about to step on a wide stone buried in the mud, the stone suddenly shifted and rolled to the side.

A terrible roar resounded across the vast emptiness of the colossal crater, making him shiver in fright.

Fearing that something was crawling from under the soil, Sunny jumped back and summoned his sword. To his side, Nephis was doing the same, while Cassie swiftly stepped back to not be in the way.

…However, there was nothing moving in the mud. No giant beast rose from it to feast on their flesh, no horrifying abomination had extended its limbs to pull them underground into its maw.

Then… what made that terrible roar?

Just as Sunny was trying to understand what was happening, a sharp pain suddenly pierced his right leg. Looking down, he saw… he saw…

The damn stone was chomping on his shin!

The stone, which turned out to be a bizarre Nightmare Creature, revealed a mouth full of long, sharp teeth on its surface. It awkwardly rolled a couple of times to reach Sunny and then tried to dig its fangs into his soft flesh.

It might have bitten Sunny's leg clean off, but, luckily, the leather boot of the Puppeteer's Shroud turned out to be too tough for the stone's jaws. So it was just munching on the leather in powerless resentment.

The situation was painful, but not at all dangerous.

Sunny stared at the stone, then raised his head and glanced at Nephis in bewilderment. Her expression was as indifferent as always, but after all the time they had spent together, he was able to recognize the similar kind of amusement written clearly on her face.

"Uh…"

Sunny strained his muscles, raised the trapped leg into the air and shook it a couple of times, trying to send the stupid stone flying.

However, the weird monster was really stubborn. With another thunderous roar, it doubled its attempts to gnaw on Sunny's shin, its stone teeth on the verge of shattering from all the pressure exerted on them.

'What a pathetic thing. The only hope of killing me it has is if I die from annoyance,' Sunny thought with a confused frown.

How could a Nightmare Creature like this even exist?!

'I guess there are losers even among their kind, eh?'

Shaking his head, Sunny allowed the shadow to wrap itself around the Midnight Shard and brought the tip of the blade down on the hungry stone with all the strength he had.

The tachi was met with some resistance, but managed to pierce and shatter the monster's stone body in the end.

The bizarre creature died while still trying to take a bite out of Sunny, defiant till the very end.

As the shattered remains of the stone fell into the mud, the voice of the Spell whispered:

[You have slain an awakened monster, Rolling Stone.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

[You have…]

Seeing a strange expression on Sunny's face, Nephis asked:

"What's wrong?"

He looked at her and blinked a couple of times.

"Uh… I just received a Memory."

Changing Star raised her eyebrow and said in an uplifted tone:

"That is great. What type of Memory?"

Sunny scratched his head, hesitated, and then answered:

"Uh. It's a… rock? An ordinary rock..."

Chapter-124: Desolation

Soon, they were standing beneath the impregnable stone walls of the mysterious city. Behind them, the great chasm of the vast crater stretched to the horizon.

Somewhere ahead, the lone human citadel in this loathsome region of the Dream Realm awaited. It promised to deliver them from this dark place and bring them home.

Sunny really couldn't wait to be finally done with this nightmare.

The city wall was built from massive slabs of grey granite. Still wet from the cold touch of the cursed sea, the ancient weathered stones looked almost black. Despite the thousands of years that passed since the mysterious builders of the wall had disappeared into the fog of time, it still looked monumental and unassailable.

The joints between the granite slabs were barely wide enough to insert a narrow blade.

Looking up, Sunny tried to guess the height of the wall. It had to be sixty meters tall, at least — twice as high as the Awakened Academy defense barrier, which was constructed with the help of both modern technology and various Aspect Abilities.

For a few moments, he wondered about the people who had erected this wall, the city behind it, and the giant statues that still stood lonesomely on the desolate shores of this cursed land. Their creations had withstood the onslaught of darkness and time, but the creators were gone. Who had they been? What terrible fate had befallen the citizens of the ruined city?

But then, Sunny angrily shook his head. These mysteries had nothing to do with him anymore. He was going home, never to return to this awful pit of horror and despair. Let someone else solve them.

After a short rest, they decided that it would be easier to climb the wall instead of circling it in search of an entrance. Even if they were to find a gate, there was no guarantee that it would be open.

Climbing the wet granite was not an easy task, but they somehow managed. When there was nothing to use as a hold, Sunny and Nephis resorted to using their swords by inserting them into the joints between the slabs. A few unpleasant cuts later, they found the right rhythm and made quick progress.

Enhanced by the consumed soul shards and shadow fragments, as well as the ruthless training regimen of the neverending battle for survival, their bodies were full of strength and endurance. Both of them were at the peak of human physical ability. Pretty soon, they had reached be top of the massive wall and climbed over its edge.

Without even needing to catch his breath, Sunny hungrily crawled forward, jumped to his feet, and gazed down.

In the ensuing silence, he could hear the sound of the golden rope scratching against stone. However, his heart was beating louder.

Soon, Nephis and Cassie joined him.

The blind girl grasped his shoulder and asked, her voice bright and full of hope:

"Sunny? What do you see?"

He licked his lips.

Beneath them, an expansive city lay in ruins. The beautiful stone buildings were broken and shattered, many of them turned into mere piles of rubble. There were no people walking along the wide streets, no clamor of voices to drive away the silence. Under the cold grey sky, the ruined city looked dead and mournful.

It was impossible to say what terrible disaster had happened here, but it was clear that it was not natural. Many of the collapsed houses were blackened by fire, with claw marks cut into the still-standing fragments of walls.

Here and there, monstrous bones of ancient horrors protruded from the ground, telling tales of desperate battles that must have had taken place on these streets once, a long time ago.

Looking closer, Sunny felt cold sweat running down his back. There were strange shapes moving through the rubble, and even more hiding in the shadows. Seeing them filled him with an icy sense of dread.

The ruined city was teeming with Nightmare Creatures.

"There is… a vast, ruined city built of weathered stone. And there are numerous monsters wandering its streets. Just like you said there would be."

The tall city wall they were standing on was as wide as a road. It stretched endlessly in both directions, enclosing the vast ruins into a strangely perfect circle. Every so often, there were towers built into its impenetrable granite body, serving as bastions against potential enemies.

Who would have thought that one day this great barrier would serve not to repel the horrible monsters, but to keep the true horrors imprisoned inside?

But Sunny wasn't that interested in the wall. He wasn't even too interested in the monsters. Instead, his eyes were drawn to the tall hill towering above the ruins. On that hill…

"There is a magnificent castle standing on a hill in the middle of the ruins. It looks like… like something out of a legend. Its walls are built from radiant white stone, with tall towers and majestic spires piercing the sky. It stands above the city like a... a symbol of hope, the only thing in this hell that seems to be untouched by the darkness and… and…"

A wide smile appeared on Cassie's face.

"Yes! This is the castle I saw!"

However, Sunny didn't hear her. Just as he was describing the splendor of the bright castle to the blind girl, his gaze accidentally

slid behind it.

Now, all he could see was the dark silhouette of a cyclopean tower that loomed above the world like an unholy spear made out of solidified blood. As soon as Sunny saw it, his heart was gripped by an unexplainable fear.

This was the Crimson Spire.

The feeling of horror it emanated was enough to make him never wish to gaze at it again. And yet, he wasn't able to look away.

By his side, Nephis was staring at it too, her thoughts a mystery. There was a tense, dark expression on her face. After a few seconds had passed, Changing Star was finally able to compose herself and turned away.

Looking in the direction of the castle, she frowned and said:

"The final stretch of the way to the citadel might be extremely dangerous. We must not hurry. Let's find a way down first…"

Chapter-125: A Feast in Time of Plague

Neither Nephis nor Sunny wanted to climb down from the wall, because that would leave them with no path of retreat should something terrible happen. Without the need to discuss it, they had decided to explore the nearest tower and see if there was a suitable way to descend from the wall inside of it.

They followed the slightly bending wall north, keeping an eye on the ruins below. From time to time, Sunny was able to notice the shapes of creatures moving through the desolate streets of the ancient city. However, nothing seemed to be interested in scaling its tall granite bulwark.

For the time being, they were safe.

However, he didn't feel safe. Instead, he kept glancing at the distant axis of the Crimson Spire and shivering.

That thing was seriously way too ominous.

'Good thing we will be out of here soon…'

That was the only thought that kept him from falling into an irrational panic. Their journey through the Forgotten Shore was about to end. They had endured a lot and survived through a lot. At times, he had not even been sure that they were going to make it out of here alive. But now, all their suffering was about to be rewarded.

The path to freedom was already in their sight… they just had to overcome this one last hurdle to return home in glory.

...Soon, they were closing in on one of the mighty towers built into the wall. The structure was round in shape, rising above the main

embankment by a good dozen meters. There was a wide wooden gate leading inside the tower, which was broken a long time ago, with only a few splinters remaining on the ancient iron hinges.

Behind the doorway, there was nothing but darkness.

Sunny felt that the sight of this entrance was a bit creepy. Of course, darkness was nothing to him. And yet…

Suddenly, Cassie tugged on his shoulder, forcing Sunny to stop. Both him and Nephis turned to her, their hands outstretched and ready to summon their swords.

"What is it, Cassie?" Sunny asked, alarmed.

In some situations, the blind girl was able to recognize danger before they could. Her keen hearing and sense of smell allowed her to sometimes perceive things that normal humans would not be able to.

Now, there was a scowl on Cassie's face. Turning her head slightly, she whispered:

"Listen."

Sunny held his breath and followed her words, straining his hearing to the limit. Soon, he was able to discern a strange sound coming from inside the tower.

Chomp. Chomp. Crunch. Chomp…

It sounded like… like something was being devoured there, flesh and bones being ground by sharp teeth. The nauseating sound of meat being torn and chewed made him grimace.

Sunny and Nephis looked at each other, then summoned their swords. Like usual, before the two of them moved forward, Sunny sent his shadow to investigate the potential enemy.

The shadow glided on the stones, quickly approaching the tower. Then, it dove into the darkness and concealed itself in the vast shade that permeated the structure.

Sunny was able to see inside…

The first thing he saw was several dead monsters lying on the stone in puddles of blood. The bloody trails left on the stone floor suggested that their massive bodies were dragged here by something very powerful. They were cut apart and eviscerated, as though dressed down by an enthusiastic butcher.

Then, he saw a large pile of gnawed bones lying on the stones. Some of them still had pieces of meat stuck to them, while others were split apart and emptied of even the marrow.

The next thing he saw was… a fire burning in a circle of stone shards, with several skewers of monster meat roasting above it.

Next to the fire, the source of the chomping and crunching sounds was sitting on the stones, munching on a well-roasted rib.

…It was a human.

In fact, it was a young woman. She seemed to be only slightly older than the three of them.

Sunny blinked.

The young woman was tall and attractive. She had hazel eyes and beautiful brown hair, currently tied in a simple braid. Her build was extremely athletic, with perfectly defined lean muscles rolling under the dewy olive skin with each movement.

And there was… uh… a lot of skin on display, since she only wore a provocatively short white tunic, augmented with bronze greaves, vambraces, and a cuirass with leather pteruges.

While Nephis was slender and lithe, this stranger radiated a sense of vitality and vigor. Everything about her was lavish and generous, screaming of strength, potency and power.

The strangest part, however, was that there was an absolutely relaxed, comfortable, and happy expression on her face. In the months spent on the Forgotten Shore, Sunny had never, even for a second, allowed himself to lower his guard completely. Neither had

Nephis or Cassie.

Even in the rare moments of rest, sheltered in reliable safety, they were always slightly tense, expecting all kinds of horrors to fall on them in an onslaught of teeth, poison, and claws. Even while under the hex of the Soul Devourer, there was always an invisible shadow in their hearts.

However, the young woman seemed to be completely content with being in this cursed place. In fact, she looked happier than Sunny had ever been, even in the real world.

As Sunny watched, the young woman messily devoured the meat of the unfortunate monster. The juices were flowing down her face and fingers. Done with the meat, she bit on the bone itself.

His eyes widened.

The adamantine bone of the Nightmare Creature was easily crushed between her teeth, and, closing her eyes in pleasure, the girl proceeded to suck out the marrow, then chew and swallow most of the bone itself.

Crunch. Crunch. Chomp. Crunch…

Finished with the rib, she threw its remains into the disturbingly sizable pile of bones at her feet, loudly burped with no decorum whatsoever, then immediately stretched her hand out to pick up another piece of monster meat from the fire, and sunk her teeth into it.

Sunny blinked a couple of times more, then shifted his perspective back and looked at Nephis.

"What did you see?"

He lingered for a bit, and then said in a hesitant tone:

"Well... it's either a very hungry human girl. Or a very gluttonous demon."

Chapter-126: Effie

Nephis stared at him for a few moments, then turned her head to Cassie and said:

"Follow behind us."

The three of them cautiously approached the entrance to the tower and lingered there, uncertain of how they should proceed.

In their minds, there were two outcomes to this unexpected situation.

One, the mysterious young woman would turn out to be a local Awakened. In that case, all their problems were going to be solved. If an Awakened happened to meet a group of Sleepers in the wild reaches of the Dream Realm, it was customary to guide them to the nearest human Citadel.

Of course, exceptions happened, but in general, Awakened strived to take care of Sleepers — in this alien land, humans had to band together. It was not only a moral obligation, but also in their own best interest.

Two, the stranger would turn out to be a Nightmare Creature. In that case, they were going to have a tough fight on their hands. Since the rank and class of the enemy were unknown, it was impossible to predict the result.

They just had to risk it.

Drawing a deep breath, Sunny followed Nephis into the cool darkness of the tower. Immediately, the appetizing smell of roasting meat hit his nostrils.

…His stomach growled.

'Crap!'

Before Sunny could react, a piece of bone flew past his head and hit the wall with enough force to shatter into tiny pieces. Belatedly, he raised the Midnight Shard and assumed a defensive stance.

But it was a little too late. The young woman had already been alerted of their presence.

Raising her head, she bared her teeth in a wide grin and murmured:

"Is someone hiding in the shadows? Why don't you come out to play…"

Her voice was deep, smoky and had a raspy huskiness to it. But what mattered the most was that she was speaking in the human language.

She was human!

Probably…

The stranger was still sitting in a relaxed pose, but Sunny didn't miss the subtle tension in her carved muscles. He had no doubt that the alleged Awakened could explode into a whirlwind of violence at any moment.

It was better not to provoke her.

Glancing at Neph, he followed her example and dismissed his sword. Then, the three of them hesitantly stepped into the circle of light cast by the bonfire.

The young woman looked at them in surprise and raised her eyebrows:

"Humans? Huh! Unexpected."

Then she smiled and shook her head.

"Ah, where are my manners?"

With that, she lightly rose to her feet. The white fabric of her tunic

shifted slightly, revealing even more of her toned, powerful thighs.

Sunny blinked.

He had assumed that the stranger was tall, but only now did he realize how imposing her true height was. The woman stood considerably taller than even Nephis, not to mention Sunny himself. Complete with her robust physique, olive skin and archaic armor, she looked like an ancient goddess.

Craning his neck to look her in the eyes was sort of irritating, though. But Sunny had no choice. If he were to just look straight, his line of sight would land directly on her shapely… uh…

The young woman, meanwhile, wiped her dirty face with a forearm and gestured at the fire.

"Here, would you like to take a seat?"

Despite the polite invitation, they hesitated. After several seconds passed in awkward silence, Nephis finally took a step forward and asked the question that had been tormenting all three of them.

With her voice uncharacteristically tense and full of suppressed emotion, she cautiously said:

"Are you… are you human?"

The stranger stared at her with a blank expression, then blinked a couple of times.

"What else would I be? A horse?"

With that, she threw he head back and laughed loudly, amused by her own silly joke. Nephis and Sunny glanced at each other, confused as to what to do.

Meanwhile, the young woman giggled a few more times and looked at them with sparks of glee dancing in her eyes.

"Of course I am human! Why are you even asking? Anyway, come sit. My neck is tired from looking down on you."

With that, she sat down near the fire and assumed a relaxed pose. Nephis, Sunny and Cassie finally approached and lowered themselves to the stones, looking at the tall girl with hungry flames burning in their eyes.

She looked them over, then frowned a little.

"Haven't seen you guys around. Are you new?"

Nephis gave her a nod.

"Yes. We have just reached the city."

She was trying very hard to act like a normal, well-adjusted person. It seemed that her endless attempts to improve her social skills had not been in vain. If Sunny didn't know how awkward and clumsy Neph's natural state was, he wouldn't have suspected anything.

The young woman grinned.

"In that case, my condolen… wait. You guys survived for two whole months in the Labyrinth?"

She whistled and looked at them with newfound respect.

"That's a real feat. Congratulations."

Nephis lingered for a few seconds, then said:

"I'm Nephis, and these are my companions, Cassia and Sunless. We are Sleepers who came here during the winter solstice."

The young woman gave them a wide, friendly smile.

"Nice to meet you! I'm Effie. Well, at least that's what people call me. I'm also a Sleeper."

Sunny frowned. So the beautiful giantess was not an Awakened, just a Sleeper like them. Strangely, he didn't remember ever seeing her in the Academy. Still…

Too impatient to remain silent, he leaned forward and said:

"Are you from the castle? There are people living there, right?"

Effie glanced at him. In her eyes, there was a hint of a strange emotion.

It almost looked like… pity.

"...There are indeed people living in the castle, yes."

Nephis and Sunny exchanged excited looks. Then, Changing Star cautiously asked:

"Can you take us there?"

Effie shrugged.

"Sure, no problem. Do you guys have shards?"

Sunny blinked. What did soul shards have to do with any of this? They had retrieved two from that weird stone he had killed at the base of the wall. Was she going to ask for payment?

Nephis retrieved the soul shards and showed them to the tall girl.

"We have two."

Effie sighed.

"Only two? Well… it's better than nothing, I guess. Keep them. You'll need them later."

Not quite understanding the meaning of her words, Changing Star lingered, then said uncertainly:

"We were hoping to reach the Citadel and access the Gateway as soon as possible. How long will it take?"

The young woman stared at them for a long time, and then suddenly bent over in a fit of hysterical laughter. She laughed so long and hard that tears soon appeared in the corners of her eyes.

Unpleasantly surprised, the three Sleepers stared at her in shock. None of them understood the reason for this bizarre behavior.

'Is she… insane?'

Sunny frowned, reevaluating the situation. Previously, the local girl just seemed to be a bit eccentric. But maybe there was more to it…

Effie's laughter stopped as abruptly as it had started. Wiping her tears, she shook her head and said in a strange tone:

"Ah, sorry guys. I just couldn't help myself. Please, forgive my lack of manners."

Then, she straightened her back, looked them heavily into the eyes, and said:

"I can take you to the castle, but there is no Gateway there. In fact, there's no way out of this cursed hell at all. I've been stuck here for three years myself already. So… welcome to the Dark City, I guess. Abandon hope all ye who enter here, and all that…"

Chapter-127: Abandon All Hope

...Shellshocked by her words, the three of them stared at the young woman with pale faces. Sunny felt something brittle and precious shattering in his heart, piercing it with an almost physical feeling of pain.

'No. No, it can't be.'

It just couldn't be true. How could… how could all of this have been for nothing?

How could all of his hopes, dreams and desires just be destroyed with a couple of words?

How was it possible?!

Somewhere beside him, Cassie suddenly said in a tiny voice:

"What do you mean, there is no Gateway?"

Effie shrugged.

"It's very simple, really. I'm sorry to be the one to break it to you, but deep down inside you must have known already. Didn't you? The Forgotten Shore… it's not really a place where humans are supposed to survive. That's why you have never heard of anything like it in the school or the Academy."

Sunny's face got contorted with anger. Of course! Of course, the answer was always within his grasp. He was just too naive and foolish to grasp it.

The Dream Realm was vast and strange, with most of its regions barely explored by humans. However, there was at least a small amount of information available about them. Some were even fully

under human control, with large Citadels like Bastion providing shelter to hundreds of thousands of Awakened.

And yet, when he had first come to the Forgotten Shore, Sunny didn't recognize any of the unique characteristics of this place. At the time, he had thought that his patchy education was to blame.

He should have realized the truth when neither Nephis nor Cassie managed to succeed where he had failed. Why would a region as unique as this one be utterly unknown? The most logical explanation would be that no one had ever returned from this deadly abyss to the real world to tell others about it.

What a fool he was! Just a few weeks in the comfortable life in the Academy, and he had completely forgotten that the world never played fair against people like him. The truth was always worse than his worst expectations, so why would this time be any different?

The world was a predator that always waited for an opportunity to devour you.

Why would he even expect anything else?

A familiar bitter taste appeared in his mouth.

Meanwhile, Effie continued in a gentle tone:

"Fifteen years ago or so, a group of powerful and desperate Sleepers managed to reach this city and claim the castle for themselves. Not because it had a Gateway, but because it was the only place that could keep them safe. At least for a while. Ever since then, a few lucky or resourceful people would find their way to the castle each solstice, only to get stuck here with the rest of us."

Nephis was sitting quietly, with only her clenched fists betraying the storm of emotions raging in her heart. Cassie was taking the news harder than both of them, though. After all, it was her vision that led them into this trap.

Her face was deathly pale, with an expression of pain and shock contorting its delicate lines. Closing her eyes, she whispered:

"But that's… that is not fair!"

Effie looked at her with pity. Then, she chuckled, smiled darkly and said:

"When was anything ever fair?"

…She was right, of course. Justice didn't really exist outside of the ethereal realm of human imagination. Sunny had learned that lesson a long, long time ago.

While he was stewing in his indignant despair, Effie's smile suddenly lost its grim undertone and turned into a happy grin once again. Leaning forward a little, she said:

"But it's not all bad! At least you have met me. You guys are incredibly lucky, really. If you hadn't run into a local, you would have been dead already."

Nephis stared at her and asked in a flat tone:

"Yeah? Why is… that?"

Her awkward manner of speech was back again in all its glory.

Effie sighed.

"The Dark City is simultaneously the safest place to be on the Forgotten Shore, and also the deadliest. It is safe because no sea monster can cross the wall, let alone reach the castle. But at the same time, it is far more dangerous than the Labyrinth because almost every Nightmare Creature here is of the Fallen rank."

Sunny blinked, feeling a cold shiver permeate his whole body. Fallen creatures… Fallen creatures were immeasurably more powerful than Awakened ones. Dormant humans like them had no business fighting against the latter, let alone the former. One awakened demon was already more than they could handle without resorting to summoning a true terror from the depths of the cursed sea.

Something much more powerful than the Carapace Demon would simply wipe them out from existence in a matter of seconds.

Remembering countless shapes moving through the ruins, he couldn't help but tremble.

Was each… each of those shapes a Fallen monster? How would anyone survive even a day in this cursed city? They would have to be insane to even try!

Slowly, the magnitude of the perilous trap they had found themselves in began to seep into his mind.

Effie smiled.

"But you guys managed to stumble into me before descending from the wall. Otherwise, the Fallen Ones would have been feasting on your souls already. Lucky, very lucky! There are very few people in the castle who go out hunting in the ruins, let alone venture so far away from it.

Meeting an experienced hunter like me was probably your only chance to avoid finding out about the true face of the Dark City a second too late."

She shook her head.

"That's, like… one to one thousand? Ten thousand? A million? At any rate, the odds were really not in your favor. Fortune is definitely in love with at least one of you, guys. So… cheer up!

Do you want some meat? I had a truly amazing hunt today. It was so amazing that I don't even mind sharing."

Nephis didn't even look at the roasting meat and instead leaned forward, her words filled with intensity:

"If there is no Gateway here, why didn't you try to leave?"

Effie blinked a couple of times and looked at her with sincere confusion.

"...Leave? And go where?"

The meat was about to become burnt, so she leaned to the fire and

removed the skewers, then replaced them with a couple of new ones. Then, with a sigh, she turned to Changing Star and said:

"You've been to the Labyrinth, so you know what it's like. There's nothing else but that damn coral and cursed sea for months of travel in every direction. You can't go on foot, you can't swim. You can't even fly, because there are swarms of dreadful flying abominations hiding in the clouds. But try to leave? Yeah, many have tried.

They're all dead now. Actually, that's how the initial master of the castle had perished."

Sunny gritted his teeth.

"So, what? You guys just hide in the castle and wait for death?"

The beautiful young woman laughed.

"Of course not, doofus!"

Then she pierced him with an unexpectedly grim look of her hazel eyes and said:

"Most of us can't even get into the castle. The king demands his tax, you know? So we just wait for death outside."

Chapter-128: King of the Hill

Sunny stared at her, trying to understand the meaning behind the strange words.

"What do you mean?"

Effie shrugged.

"The castle belongs to a man named Gunlaug. If you want to enter and live in the safety of the castle walls, protected and provided for by his hunters, you need to pay a tribute. One shard each week."

…Of course there was exploitation going on even in this pit of despair. What else did he expect? As long as there were people, someone was going to end up as prey.

Sunny sensed a familiar dark feeling rising up from the depths of his soul. At some point, he had lulled it into a slumber and forgotten it, but now it finally returned to its rightful place.

A corner of his mouth curled up.

"What happens if you can't pay the tribute?"

The huntress glanced at him with confusion.

"What do you think? You are not allowed to step anywhere near the gates. There's a small settlement for us unfortunate wretches beneath the castle walls, where we make do with what little we have and tremble in the night, hoping that nothing comes out of the darkness to devour us. That's pretty much it."

He hesitated.

"But how are people even supposed to get soul shards in this cursed place?"

Effie gestured to the corpses of the monsters she had slain.

"By hunting. One can find Awakened creatures here and there in the city. The trick is to find and kill them without stumbling into something far more deadly. Gunlaug's people form parties and go out to hunt, with experienced pathfinders leading the way. They bring back food, Memories, materials and shards. Nothing stops people from attempting the same."

She fell silent for a few moments, and then said in a darker tone:

"Of course, without good Memories, vast amounts of accumulated soul essence and intricate knowledge of the city, those people usually don't live long. Most of them either die or turn to other ways of earning shards. There's very few independent hunters with more than a couple of successful hunts to their names. Ones that are still alive, I mean."

Sunny glanced at the dead monsters, each of them large enough to give him pause.

"What about you? How many did you survive?"

Effie smiled.

"More than a couple."

With a chuckle, she raised her hand and began folding fingers, a thoughtful expression on her face:

"Let's see… one, two… uh, five…"

Running out of fingers on one hand, she scratched her head and said with a bit of uncertainly:

"I'm not really sure, but it should be around a hundred or two. Yeah."

Sunny's eyes widened. Two… two hundred?

If what Effie had said was true, then she was a force to be reckoned with. Slaying even one Awakened creature was worthy of respect. Slaying hundreds of them, however, was nothing short of remarkable,

perhaps even heroic… and a little fearsome. Especially since she had hunted them alone in the middle of a cursed ruin full of Fallen abominations, unaided, with no one to rely on except for herself.

The easygoing huntress was not as simple as she appeared.

He frowned.

"If this is true, then you should have had no problem paying the tribute to stay in the castle. This doesn't make sense. Why haven't you?"

Effie shrugged with ambivalence. The topic didn't seem to interest her.

"Let's just say that I don't like the… ambiance there."

Sunny wanted to learn more, but suddenly, Nephis spoke again, her voice strangely tense:

"You said that there were… other ways of earning soul shards. What are they?"

The huntress turned to her and was silent for a while, a hint of some dark emotion in her eyes. However, it was quickly erased by her usual laidback smile:

"Well, there's a few ways. If you have a useful Utility Ability, you can become a craftsman or an artifex in the castle. There's not a lot of such Sleepers, so they are well-regarded and cared for. If not, uh… there are other opportunities, too. Boys can become Gunlaug's soldiers, while girls… can enter his harem. Pretty ones like the two of you especially.

No one will force you, of course."

Nephis scowled. Sunny could see white sparks dancing in her eyes.

"So… you can either become his soldier, his servant, his plaything, or die. But that is… your own choice. No one is forcing anyone to do anything. Of course."

Effie grinned.

"Smart girl. You get it."

Changing Star looked down, her indifferent face turning hard and cold. Her fists were clenched so hard that they seemed bloodless.

"So why hasn't anyone… killed him yet?"

The huntress laughed.

"Kill Gunlaug? Oh, many have tried. Great people, terrible people, and everyone in-between. You can see their skulls above the castle gate, actually."

She shook her head.

"I like your train of thought, princess, but you should forget it. Just consider him to be immortal. He practically is. Believe me when I say that no Sleeper can defeat Gunalug, ever. It's simply impossible."

Effie sighed.

"Plus, no matter how much I hate the bastard, he is the only thing that holds this place together. Despicable as he is, without him, we would have all been dead already."

Sunny watched Nephis, waiting to see her reaction. What he saw did not make him happy at all.

On her beautiful ivory face, there was nothing but cold indifference and resolve.

It was the same expression he had seen on it before the battle with the carapace centurion first, and the Carapace Demon later. Without even needing Cassie's prophetic Ability, he could easily imagine what was going on in her head.

'This is… going to become a problem.'

As though sensing the same thing, Effie grimaced.

"No, seriously. Trying to go against Gunlaugh will only get you killed... if you're lucky. Don't even think about that. Thinking too much is not good for your health here in the Dark City, anyway."

Then, she smiled and gestured to the fire.

"Just have some of this delicious meat instead. Life is good when your stomach is full, right? Let me tell you, this is most likely your last chance to eat anything for free. Food is a real rarity in these parts. Can you believe it?"

Sunny sighed, then leaned forward and picked up a sizzling piece of meat.

No matter what happened, they had to keep going. One step at a time. This was the only way to survive.

"Of course I can believe it. I'm from the outskirts, you know. I didn't even know what real meat smells like before entering the Academy!"

With that, he handed the piece of meat to Cassie, took another one, and began devouring it greedily.

Nephis lingered for a bit, but then followed his example.

Effie giggled.

"That's the spirit! See, doofus gets it."

It seemed as though Changing Star had listened to her advice. At least on the surface, she had accepted that defeating the current master of the castle was impossible.

But Sunny knew that, deep down inside, she remained unconvinced.

After all, Nephis was in the habit of making impossible things happen.

Chapter-129: Solace

After the shocking revelation about the cruel futility of their long and arduous journey to the Dark City, the desire to reach the promised castle that kept the three of them going for so long had diminished significantly. However, they still wanted to get there as soon as possible. There was a tiny remnant of hope still burning in Sunny's heart.

Perhaps… perhaps Effie was lying to them, or wrong about everything.

Somehow.

He didn't really believe it, though. The beautiful huntress seemed sincere and competent, if a little eccentric. More than that, her words made too much sense.

But Effie wasn't in a rush to leave the granite tower.

"There's not enough daylight left to traverse that much distance. Moving through the ruins is a slow ordeal. Get comfortable and rest. We'll leave tomorrow at dawn."

After that, she got busy dressing down the monster carcasses with a long knife that appeared in her hand. She even summoned a Memory that looked like a leather apron to avoid getting blood on her tunic. Whistling an upbeat melody under her nose, the vigorous young woman looked like an enthusiastic gourmet chef.

Nephis, Sunny and Cassie were in no mood to talk. Each of them sat somberly by themselves, trying to digest the awful reality of their new situation.

Sunny was utterly disheartened.

He felt as though someone had pulled the batteries out of his body, leaving him with no strength or desire to do anything. The world had become dim and tiresome.

'That's hope for you.'

He didn't even have enough motivation to get angry. It was as though… as though he had run an exhausting marathon and crossed the finish line, only to find out that there was another race waiting for him on the other side.

In fact, he would have to keep running forever.

He would never meet Master Jet and Teacher Julius again to thank them for the advice and teachings that had helped him survive, and maybe even repay their kindness. He would never become an Awakened and learn more mysteries of his strange Aspect. Most importantly, his dreams of becoming rich and spending the rest of his life in comfort were also not meant to be.

Which hurt the most.

'Figures.'

Crestfallen, he made an effort to find some semblance of solace in this disastrous fiasco.

'Well… if you think about it… I'm still alive. That has to be worth something, right?'

His shadow glanced at him, not entirely convinced.

'Plus, I can easily stay alive for the foreseeable future. Yeah, the big picture changed for the worst, but our immediate situation has actually improved a lot. We are safe from the constant threat of drowning or being devoured by the dwellers of the deep dark sea. We have also found a strong community of humans.'

No matter how things were run in the castle, there were hundreds of people living there. Numbers and experience meant everything in the Dream Realm. By becoming a part of a human collective, they were going to shed most of the burdens that had been silently crushing

them all this time. Compared to the infernal gauntlet of the Labyrinth, life in the castle was going to be like a dream.

If they were willing to submit to its thug of a master, of course. If Sunny was alone, he probably would. Now, however…

But even if they were to refuse, there was still the outer settlement. Effie seemed to be doing just fine as an independent hunter. She didn't even seem miserable.

'In fact, she might just be the most contented person I've ever seen. Seriously, how can she be so laidback and cheerful? Is she insane?'

He cast a sidelong glance at the unreasonably tall huntress and frowned.

'Well, let's ponder about it. She has a roof over her head and a limitless supply of delicious food, provided that she hunts it down herself. That is already better than my life in the outskirts.'

Come to think about it, remaining in the Dark City for the rest of his life was not how he had envisioned his future, but it was not that different from struggling to survive in the slums of the real world. Actually, in a lot of senses, it was way better. So, maybe, the situation seemed to be so bad not because it actually was, but because it simply didn't fit his inflated expectations.

Perhaps Effie didn't expect anything from life at all, and that's why she was so damn happy and lively even in the middle of this odious hell.

'Yeah… that must be it. Problem solved. Easy.'

The shadow shook its head and turned away. Sunny sighed. Despite his somewhat rational attempt to find the bright side in this calamity, he didn't feel any better, at all. In fact, thinking about how inescapable and bleak their future was only made him more tired.

Suddenly, his skin crawled. The familiar sensation of dread and unease flooded his mind, only now, it was so much more profound and invasive.

The shadow of the Crimson Spire had fallen on the Dark City.

…Soon, the sound of waves crashing against stone informed them of the coming of night. Not in the mood to even stand up, Sunny silently sent his shadow to take a look outside.

As the last rays of the falling sun colored the world in the shades of red, the cursed sea was surging out of the great crater. Sunny watched as the distant statue of the beautiful faceless woman was slowly drowned by the darkness, until only her open hand remained above the waves. Then, he shifted his gaze and looked down.

The undulating black surface of the cursed sea stopped mere meters beneath the edge of the granite wall. It seemed as though he could almost touch it with his hand. On the other side of the stone barrier, the ruined city lay submerged in shadows, dozens of meters below the water level.

Trapped between the endless expanse of the dark sea and the vast emptiness of the ruins, the mighty wall seemed to be as thin as a sheet of paper. And yet, it silently withstood the crushing pressure of the black waves, serving as a dam that protected the city below from being erased by the terrible flood… just like it did for thousands of years.

However, Sunny couldn't help but imagine all that crushing weight bursting through the collapsing wall in an all-consuming torrent of darkness. He felt shivers running down his spine.

Commanding his shadow to return, Sunny finally forced himself to stand up and walked over to Nephis.

Changing Star was sitting with her back against the wall, a dark expression on her face. Hearing his footsteps, she raised her eyes.

Sunny sat down beside her, lingered for a while, and then said:

"What do you think?"

She was silent for a long time, simply looking at him with an inexorable expression. Just when he was about to think that there would be no answer, Neph finally spoke.

As she did, white sparks ignited in the depths of her cold grey eyes.

"We will find a way to return. No matter what has to be done, we will."

Her words echoed inside the granite tower, making shadows on the walls dance in sinister glee.

Chapter-130: Strength of a Dozen Men

In the morning, they set out for the castle.

Before leaving the safe haven of the granite tower, Effie gave them a list of instructions:

"Follow behind me. Listen to everything I say. Don't make any noise. Don't bleed. Don't think too much. Some of the creatures out there can hear noisy thoughts, others can sense strong emotions.

So don't feel fear, either."

Sunny stared at her with a grim expression. How was he supposed to control what he feels?

The vigorous huntress grinned.

"What? You never tried to solve math equations in your head to impress a lovely lady? Just do the same."

As Sunny's cheeks began to turn bright red, she giggled and turned to Cassie and Neph:

"Correction. The two of you, try not to feel fear. Doofus, you try not to get too excited. If walking behind me turns out to be too much, ask to get slapped, alright?"

Sunny scowled and uttered through gritted teeth:

"That… won't be a problem."

Effie blinked a couple of times, then smiled.

"Ah! Playing for the other team? I see, I see…"

What… what was that supposed to mean?!

Trying to get his emotions under control, Sunny took a deep breath and counted to ten.

'Math equations my ass… who does she think she is?! Wait… why am I counting?'

Making sure that they understood her instructions, the huntress turned around and rolled the massive slab of granite that blocked the exit from the tower to the side. Lean muscles tensed and moved under her olive skin, making for a picturesque view.

Sunny stared at her back and gulped. That slab of granite had to weigh a couple of tons, at least. How strong was the beautiful giantess, exactly?

Catching a glimpse of his stare, Effie raised an eyebrow and winked.

"Like what you see?"

He answered on autopilot:

"Yes… huh… wait, no! I mean, that's not why I was looking. How are you that strong?"

She glanced at the granite slab, then at him.

"Oh, that. That's my Aspect Ability. It's a strong all-around physical enhancement."

That was… a very rare and powerful Ability to have. While not as flashy as many others, it was practically the ultimate warrior Ability. With not only her strength but also her speed, agility, endurance and resilience boosted, Effie was like one of those ancient heroes Neph sometimes talked about. Especially since that boost seemed to be so extravagant.

Plus, she had most likely absorbed a very large amount of soul essence over the years of hunting monsters in the Dark City. All those shards the recalcitrant huntress refused to pay as tribute to the tyrannical lord of the castle had to go somewhere.

But why would she just admit what her Ability was? Sharing secrets like that was not a wise thing to do, especially not in the ruthless reality of the Forgotten Shore.

Noticing his surprise, Effie grinned.

"What? It's not like it's a great mystery. Around here, anyone with a pair of eyes knows what my Ability can do. Do you want me to tell you what my Flaw is as well?"

There was a mischievous glint in her eyes.

'Yeah, right. As if anyone is insane enough to share their…'

"It's very simple! My Aspect not only enhances all my physical attributes, it also does the same with all my physical needs. Why do you think I ate enough meat to create a literal pile of gnawed bones, for the fun of it?"

She laughed and shook her head.

"Well, it was fun, not gonna lie…"

So the price for having the strength of many men was to have the hunger of many men, as well. Out here in the Dark City, where food was scarce and hard to come by, it was a dangerous Flaw to possess. It was a curse that could force a person to hunt more, and therefore risk injury and death more than anyone else would have to.

Most people would scoff at its severity, but not Sunny. He knew what hunger, real hunger, felt like. What it could do to a person.

Perhaps that was the reason why Effie was out here in the first place. Perhaps she had become a huntress not because she wanted to, but because she simply didn't have a choice.

'What other physical needs do people have?' Sunny thought, a little confused. 'Air, then water and food, then… uh… huh?'

"Hey! I said not to get excited!"

Sunny flinched and looked up at Effie, who was staring at him and

cackling. Embarrassed, he gritted his teeth in anger.

'Don't flatter yourself, beanpole!'

However, when he noticed that Nephis and Cassie were observing them with amusement clearly written on their faces, his anger somewhat subsided. Belatedly, Sunny realized that, perhaps, the experienced huntress had been joking around with him not just out of pure mischief.

Perhaps she was trying to lighten the mood to get them into the right mental state, thus making traversing the cursed city less perilous.

Meanwhile, Effie grinned.

"What? No answer?"

Sunny glared at her and said:

"Don't distract me."

Then he forcefully changed the flow of his thoughts and reluctantly added:

"I'm solving equations..."

***

A minute later, they left the granite tower and stepped onto the streets of the Dark City.

Effie had summoned the helmet of her archaic armor before venturing forth. It was of the Corinthian design, with a tall crest of blue horsehair and a narrow visor that left only her eyes and lips exposed.

On her back, there was a leather bag containing the meat, bones, and hides of the monsters she had slain during the hunt. Sunny knew for a fact that this bag was much larger on the inside than it seemed from the outside — otherwise, in order to accommodate all of Effe's trophies, it would have had to be comically big. However, it still weighed way too much for an ordinary person to carry.

Including the armor, the long knife, and the black leather apron, it was the fourth Memory he had seen the huntress summon. He wondered how many more did she have in her arsenal.

He had yet to see what weapons Effie used.

In the ghostly light of early dawn, they entered the cursed ruins.

Chapter-131: Traversing the Dark City

The mournful ruins of the once-great city sprawled around them like a desolate stone maze. With grey skies above and nothing but dead silence surrounding the cohort of four tense Sleepers, it seemed as though they were walking through a vast, cyclopean graveyard.

Sunny had to constantly remind himself that there were countless horrors hiding in the ominous shadows of the Dark City. One wrong turn could land them in dire peril. In this ancient ruin, they had no choice but to entrust their lives to the hands of their guide.

Luckily, the guide in question was not a morose dead poet, but a tall, extremely attractive young woman clad in a pleasantly revealing archaic armor. In their current circumstances, Sunny much preferred the company of a warrior to that of a useless scribbler.

In fact, circumstances had nothing to do with it. He was having trouble imagining any situation where a writer would be helpful to have around. From what he knew, all writers were lazy, talentless hacks whose only real skill was finagling money out of honest people while getting off on torturing them with sadistic cliffhangers.

Not to mention that none of them had a backside like Effie… uh… wait, what?

Getting his mind out of the gutter, Sunny frowned and reminded himself to keep his emotions in check.

In a sense, this harsh necessity was a blessing. The perilous reality of the ruined city prevented them from concentrating on the bitter despair that had taken a stranglehold on their hearts after the grim revelation of the previous day.

They just had to put one foot in front of the other and not think too much about anything.

One step at a time. That was how he was going to survive.

With a heavy sigh, Sunny glanced around and continued walking.

Just like Effie had said, traversing the ruins turned out to be a slow ordeal. The huntress lead them through the complex maze of wide and narrow streets following a strange, convoluted path that only she knew. Often, they would have to stop and hide, waiting for some unseen danger to pass.

Sometimes they walked under the empty sky, sometimes they dove into the weathered buildings and spent some time crawling through the piles of rubble inside. Other times, Effie was able to lead them straight through half-collapsed houses to emerge into secluded alleyways on the other side.

Once or twice, they had even climbed to the rooftops and proceeded forward by walking on precariously rickety tiles or bared support beams, jumping across vast chasms and balancing on half-rotten planks of wood that had been placed there by someone to bridge especially wide gaps. During these moments, either Neph or Sunny would carry Cassie in their arms.

Sunny was surprised to discover that the interiors of some buildings were incredibly well-preserved. It was as though the inhabitants had just left a few days ago, as opposed to the thousands of years that had passed in reality. Because of that, he was able to catch glimpses of how the citizens of this ancient city had lived all that time ago.

It was a strange and eerie sight.

He was also able to clearly understand that Effie indeed knew the ruins very well. Everywhere they went, there were signs of her previous visits and preparations.

From the planks placed across the gaps between roofs to the heavy slabs of stone used to hide improvised passages, it was apparent that she had spent years of meticulous effort turning large parts of this

lethal maze into her own private hunting grounds.

He had gained a new respect for the seemingly carefree young woman. She almost made traveling through the cursed ruins look safe and easy.

However, he knew that this couldn't be farther from the truth. In fact, he suspected that death was constantly breathing down their necks, only barely held at bay by Effie's knowledge and timely judgment. Several freshly eviscerated carcasses that they had stumbled on served as a clear sign that Dark City was teeming with harrowing life.

Even terrifying Nightmare Creatures were not safe here.

More than once, they heard the distant sounds of claws scraping against stone, sensed the ground trembling under heavy footsteps, or noticed swift shadows falling through the clouds. In those moments, Effie would change their course on the fly or find a perfectly concealed hiding spot without fail.

Meeting her had indeed been a rare stroke of luck.

But with each hour that passed, Sunny grew increasingly somber. No matter what kind of future awaited them in this cursed place, he had no doubt that they would have to hunt for food as well. That meant that he was going to have to learn all the same things that Effie had learned, and maybe even more. The task seemed incredibly daunting. He wasn't even sure that he would be able to accomplish it.

At least he wasn't going to do it by himself. There was Changing Star to partner with, and Cassie. Their presence calmed him down.

Living in this terrible hell alone… he didn't even want to think about it. Such a wretched existence would surely kill him, and if not, at least drive him insane. At that point, he wouldn't wish to be alive anyway. Who would want to endure that kind of misery?

'Why think about something that is never going to happen?'

Glancing at Nephis and Cassie, Sunny hid a smile and hurried to catch up to Effie.

Come to think about it, he had it way better than the recalcitrant huntress. There were reliable allies with whom he had forged bonds of trust and companionship at his side. The three of them made each other stronger.

More than that, his own Aspect was able to provide him with a similar comprehensive physical enhancement Ability, albeit a lesser version of it. It was much more versatile, though, allowing him to transfer the enhancement effect onto Memories and inanimate objects, not to mention his invaluable ability to move and scout around without being seen.

Sunny would offer the services of his shadow to Effie, but he wasn't sure about how safe that would be. If there were creatures in these ruins capable of sensing thoughts and emotions, what were the chances that some of them would be able to sense the gaze of the shadow as well? He would have to learn more and experiment before allowing it to wander around on its own.

These thoughts had cheered him up a little.

…Soon, as the sun began to fall toward the horizon, they had finally reached the base of the hill on which stood the magnificent castle.

Sunny looked up, sensing his heart beating wildly. A heavy and anxious feeling took hold of his mind.

Depending on what happened next, their fates were going to change forever… either for the better, or for the worse.

Chapter-132: End of the Line

In the center of the cursed city, a tall hill towered above the ruins. At its base, an arch made of pristine white marble stood amidst the devastation. It was unscathed and spotless, as though protected from the entropic touch of the all-consuming darkness by some sublime force. Beyond the arch, a wide road paved with white stones scaled the hill.

Sunny looked up as they passed beneath the arch, trying to imagine crowds of festively dressed people doing the same in the distant past. It was hard and a little heartbreaking thinking about how the ancient city must have looked before the mysterious calamity.

Not turning her head, Effie said in a wistful tone:

"There are areas in the ruins that many Nightmare Creatures tend to avoid for some reason. The castle is one of these places. I was told that back when the original group of Sleepers came here hoping to carve a foothold in the city, there was only a single Spire Messenger nesting in the throne room, with no other monsters around. Those madmen actually managed to kill it."

Nephis gave her a glance.

"Spire Messenger?"

The huntress chuckled.

"Big ugly bastards with black feathers and pale bodies, you must have seen them hunting in the Labyrinth. They come from the Spire."

Changing Star hesitated.

"What are their rank and class?"

Effie shivered a little.

"Fallen beasts. That's why I said that those guys were a little mad. But they were a powerful bunch."

She grew silent and then added in a quiet voice:

"It must have taken a lot to kill them, in the end."

Brought into a solemn mood by that last statement, they continued forward in silence. The stone road coiled around the hill, slowly climbing its sheer slopes. Here and there, it was broken by long stretches of stairs and formidable, but strangely graceful fortifications. No one was standing guard, though. The whole road was empty.

Sunny gestured to one of the stone barricades and asked:

"Why are there no watchmen?"

Effie shrugged.

"Gunlaug has barely enough people to man the castle walls. They will notice anything that approaches the hill, though. The whole city is in clear view from up there, and there are different protective measures put in place. They have already spotted us, too."

Sunny shifted his body a little, not enjoying the feeling of being watched by some unseen, potentially dangerous strangers.

…After a long time walking up the coiling road of white stone, they finally reached the zenith of the hill and saw the mighty castle in all its glory.

Up close, it looked even more magnificent.

Built from the same pristine marble as the arch at the base of the hill, it stretched into the sky like a white mountain made by human hands. The frontmost tower was wide and imposing, with a tall decorated gate and a grandiose staircase leading down from it to a vast stone platform that the road ended with.

On both sides of the frontmost tower, brought slightly forth, two other stood as bastions, connected to it with arched aerial bridges and accompanied by smaller companion towers of their own. Behind them, the main keep soared even higher, as though trying to challenge the menacing Crimson Spire that loomed above the world far in the distance.

Smaller towers, spires, and wings stood here and there, forming a complex and strangely harmonious formation.

The whole structure was incredibly beautiful, striking, and at the same time radiated a feeling of unassailable firmness. It was as though the castle was built for gods, not mortals.

The only thing that spoiled the picture were dozens of human skulls hanging above the gates on rusty chains.

Sunny grimaced, brought down to grim reality by this ghastly sight.

His gaze fell lower, only now noticing dozens of crude, makeshift hovels huddled on the stone platform. They were built from fragments of rubble, rotting wood and pieces of monster hides, chaotically clinging to the stones as if afraid to be blown away by the wind.

An unpleasant, strangely familiar smell hit him in the nose a few moments later. It was the motley, but unmistakable stench of the slums. That stench was nothing like the poisonous reek of the outskirts, and at the same time exactly the same.

Sunny couldn't help but smile crookedly.

'Gee. I'm home.'

Between the hovels, gaunt and empty-eyed people were busy eking out their pitiful existences. They were dressed in a strange mix of dirty rags and shiny Memories, with those wearing armor standing out among the rest like rare oddities. Most of them were extremely young, barely older than Sunny himself. He could smell their exhaustion and desperation even from where he was standing.

Sunny really wanted to laugh.

After everything he had been through ever since becoming infected by the Nightmare Spell, the cycle had finally completed. He was right back to where he had started, only much worse off.

Wasn't that the funniest thing ever?

If this wasn't fate, then he didn't know what was. Oh, the irony…

Changing Star's voice tore him away from his reverie.

"Sunny? Are you okay?"

He blinked a couple of times, then slowly turned to face her and said after a brief pause:

"Yeah. I was just reminiscing."

Something in his voice must have sounded strange, because she gave him a long look before turning away with a short nod.

"Good. Don't relax just yet."

Then, she turned to Effie and asked:

"What do we do now?"

The huntress looked around and shrugged.

"It's going to get dark soon, so I would advise you to find a shelter before that. Look around for an empty hut. With how many people die each season, there's always plenty of those. Otherwise, two of you can pay the tribute and go into the castle. But the third one will have to stay."

Changing Star lingered, then said:

"What about you?"

Effie grinned.

"What about me? That luxury one-bedroom cottage over there is mine. Mind you, it was built from the best kind of crap you can find here… although it's still crap. Anyway, I am going home, preparing

myself a hearty supper and then going to sleep. I'm dead tired from these last couple of days. Sorry, I don't host guests."

Nephis stared at her, obviously wanting to say more, but then simply nodded.

"I see. Thank you for everything you have done for us. I won't forget it."

Effie smiled, patted her on the shoulder and turned to Sunny and Cassie.

"Bye, doofus. Bye, doll. See you around."

With that, she began whistling a cheerful melody and walked away.

The three of them were suddenly left alone, lost and unsure about what to do. The inhabitants of the outer settlement didn't pay them a lot of attention, only occasionally throwing an indifferent glance at the three young strangers. Only Cassie's beauty attracted a couple of intense, darkly fascinated gazes.

After a minute or so passed in disoriented silence, Changing Star hesitantly took out the two soul shards that they had collected from the remains of the Rolling Stone and looked at the glimmering crystals lying in her hand.

They had to make a decision.

Chapter-133: Farewell

Nephis held the shimmering crystals, looking at them with a heavy expression. Sunny was also staring at the shards, his head full of dark thoughts.

The remnants of shattered souls glowed softly in the dim twilight of dusk.

Around them, the inhabitants of the outer settlement were hurrying to get inside their pitiful hovels before the coming of night. The sun was already hidden behind the cyclopean silhouette of the Crimson Spire, drowning the world in its eerie shadow. The air was full of fear and worry.

He grimaced.

"What are you thinking about?"

Changing Star sighed and looked up. Her ivory face was harsh and thoughtful. She remained silent for a while, and then said in her usual calm tone:

"We need to split up."

Sunny couldn't help but laugh.

"You do know what usually happens when people split up in these kinds of situations, right?"

She stared at him with no humor in her cold, grey eyes.

"This is not a drama, Sunny. We have the means to provide two of us with food and shelter for a week. There's no reason to pass on this opportunity."

Cassie turned to her, a confused expression on her face.

"But… but what about the third?"

An uncomfortable silence hung between them, broken only by the whistling wind. Sunny looked at the blind girl, then at Nephis, and finally glanced at himself. Which one of them was going to remain hungry in the bitter cold while the other two would be eating their fill in the comfortable safety of the castle?

He thought that he had an inkling.

'What else did I expect?'

It was less than ten minutes since they reached the human civilization — well, whatever passed for one in this loathsome purgatory — and the tentative connection that had been established between them in the crucible of the Labyrinth was already coming apart at the seams.

Just as he had expected, the nature of their relationship was going to change now that they weren't essentially the last three people in the whole wide world, with no one else to rely on but each other. Was it strong enough to endure without that desperate need? He wasn't sure.

Throughout his whole life, Sunny had never managed to last long in any group. He didn't know if this time was going to be any different.

Just as his insecurity threatened to break out of control, Nephis sighed and handed him the soul shards.

"Here. Take Cassie inside."

He stared at her hand, then looked up sharply.

A strange storm of emotions erupted in his heart. There was surprise, joy, concern… but at the same time, irrationally, a dark sense of shame and resentment. Not knowing how to deal with all these feelings, he scowled and asked:

"Why me?"

Changing Star simply raised an eyebrow. Shaking his head, Sunny

offered her a crooked smile and added:

"Don't get me wrong, I'm not refusing. I'm just curious why are you so kind all of a sudden. Is it out of some misguided sense of nobility?"

Nephis looked at him for a while, and then said with indifference:

"I have never been noble. I have never been kind."

He blinked, struggling with the desire to pinch Neph and make sure that she was awake. Had she met herself? If she wasn't noble, then who was?

Meanwhile, Changing Star shrugged and looked away.

"It is simply the best choice. Right now, we need information the most. With the help of the shadow, you will be able to learn much more about what is going on in the castle than I ever would. While you are gathering information inside, I will do the same here. We will meet in a week, share our findings, and decide what to do next."

Sunny just stared at her. Did Neph just… reveal herself to be as cynically pragmatical as he was? Once again, he felt a weird mix of emotions. He was simultaneously elated and hurt by her lack of sentiment.

However, the fact that she simply assumed that they were going to continue working together, as though it was a given, had not avoided his attention. For some reason, this small detail gave Sunny a warm feeling.

Nephis looked at him and added:

"Besides, the terms of our trade have come to an end. Your promise was to give up on your share of spoils on the way to the castle. Well, here we are. That stone creature was your kill, so these shards are yours by right."

'Trade? What trade?'

Oh, yeah… the trade he had made with Changing Star to get her to teach him swordsmanship and hide the fact that he had no way to

absorb soul shards. He has almost forgotten about it.

But she didn't.

Now that Sunny had been reminded of its existence and realized that it was over, he felt a sudden pang of regret. It was as though one of the few strings that connected them together had been suddenly severed.

With a sigh, he took the soul shards from her hand and gripped them tightly.

"Alright. Then… I'll meet you in a week, I guess."

Sunny opened his mouth, wishing to say something else, but then just turned away. Stepping aside, he gave the girls some privacy to say their goodbyes. Soon, Cassie's delicate hand found his shoulder.

Sunny glanced at the blind girl, remained silent for a bit, and then asked:

"Are you ready?"

She hesitated before answering. When she did, there was a hint of sadness in her voice:

"Yes."

With that, they walked away and left Nephis behind, standing alone in the surging darkness of the descending night.

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Guiding the blind girl, Sunny approached the grand stairs that led to the ornate gates of the magnificent marble castle. Out here, there was nothing but the howling of the wind and the encroaching veil of darkness. It seemed as though the dwellers of the slum were not allowed to build their hovels on the wide stretch of stone that separated the marble steps from the outer settlement.

"Be careful, there are steps ahead."

After warning Cassie, he sensed a cold feeling grasp his heart. For some reason, it felt as though once he stepped on these stairs, there would be no way back.

Gritting his teeth, Sunny took a step forward and began his ascent to the castle.

Soon, they approached the apex and stopped in front of a couple of unfriendly guards.

Both of the young men barring their way wore armor-type Memories and wielded their weapons in the open, as though trying to warn anyone approaching to not test their patience. They looked at Sunny without even trying to hide their disdain.

"What do you want, rat?"

Sunny hesitated, then held out the soul shards.

One of the guards glanced at them and grinned.

"Well, would you look at that. The rat has brought us a present."

Chuckling, he took the glimmering crystals and waved a hand.

"Come on in. Someone will meet you inside."

Struggling to not glare at the armed Sleepers with murder in his eyes, Sunny forced out a pale smile and cautiously walked past them.

Then, looking up at the dozens of human skulls swinging above them on rusty chains, he sighed darkly and led Cassie through the gates of the castle.

Chapter-134: Bright Castle

As they passed through the ornate gates, a large hall opened up before them. Hearing a strange rustle from above, Sunny raised his head and saw tall windows with stained glass panes soaring to the distant ceiling. During the day, the hall must have been filled with cascading rays of beautiful light.

Currently, though, several young women were nimbly moving from one window to another, draping them with thick sheets of crude fabric. The makeshift wooden ladders they used creaked and cracked, creating a strange and almost melodic sound.

It seemed as though the sheets of fabric were being fastened in a way that prevented even the smallest glint of light from escaping the castle during the night. Sunny suspected that every window in the marble fortress was currently being covered in the same way.

Just as this thought appeared in his mind, a loud noise thundered behind their backs. Turning around, he saw the ornate gates closing. The two guards who had met them outside were already sliding a heavy iron bolt into the sockets, their faces red from strain. The massive bar must have weighed more than the two of them combined.

The castle was now sealed from the outside world, ready to face the onslaught of cursed darkness.

Suddenly, Sunny felt like an animal caught in a cage.

Trying to calm himself down, he looked around and noticed an opulent wooden desk that looked completely out of place in the grand hall. It must have been dragged here from some other part of the marble citadel. Behind the desk, a gaunt young man with nervous eyes was writing something down on a piece of parchment.

The whole thing looked strangely similar to a reception desk in a luxurious hotel… or, rather, to what Sunny imagined such a thing would look like. He had never actually been to a hotel, of course.

Hesitating for a few moments, he walked over to the desk and addressed the young man:

"Hey. Uh… we've been told that someone will meet us inside."

The castle receptionist flinched and looked up from his paper, a fearful expression appearing on his face. When he realized who was speaking to him, though, the fear disappeared, replaced by a tentative smile.

The young man had a thin face and a pale, unhealthy complexion. He looked hungry and weak, much more like those poor souls in the outer settlement than someone who lived in the castle. His clothes, however, were clean and tidy, without any signs of wear and tear like that of the people outside.

"Ah, guests! Sorry, you gave me a fright there. Welcome, welcome to the Bright Castle. Whoah, you were just in time. A couple of minutes later, and the gates would have been closed."

Saying that, he threw a tense glance at the two guards and then quickly looked away.

"Anyway, my name is Harper. I'm responsible for guest accommodations today. Let's get you… oh! I don't seem to recognize you guys. Is this your first time paying the tribute?"

Sunny stared at him for a couple of seconds, feeling Cassie squeeze his shoulder a little tighter, then said:

"Yes."

Harper smiled.

"Congratulations! You might not even suspect it, but I was once in your shoes myself. In fact, it was just a few months ago. But ever since Lord Gunlaug graced me with his kindness, I've been living in the safety of the castle. You'll love it here too, I'm sure."

'...Right.'

Sunny didn't know if the young man was sincere in his gratitude to the local tyrant or was simply saying these things for the guards to hear, and honestly, he didn't care.

What piqued his interest, though, was that Harper did not seem as surprised by the timing of their arrival into the Dark City as Effie had been. But then he realized that people living in the castle might not have known who came to the outer settlement and when.

They would probably assume that he and Cassie had entered the Dream Realm close to the ruins and then spent the last two months scrounging for soul shards to pay their way into the castle. This was a good detail to know, since Sunny didn't want to announce the true extent of their competence just yet.

Judging by how impressed Effie was by the fact that they had managed to carve their way through the Labyrinth, this would attract a lot of unnecessary attention.

He smiled with the corner of his mouth.

"So, what do we need to do now?"

Harper picked up his quill and opened a large ledger.

"That's very simple, really. I'll just need your names to mark when the two of you paid the tribute, and that's pretty much it. We have a lot of spare rooms here, especially in the Tower of Dusk. It is very quiet, so how about I settle you there?"

There was a nervous glint in his eyes.

'Tower of Dusk… probably means that it's in the western part of the castle, facing the Crimson Spire. No wonder people don't want to live there.'

But to Sunny, fewer people meant less danger. He gave the gaunt young man a nod.

"Sure. No problem."

Harper smiled.

"Great! That's great! Uh, so your names…"

Sunny interrupted him, trying to avoid dangerous questions:

"I'm Sunless, and this is Cassia."

The young man wrote their names down and marked the date of their arrival. Sunny stared at his neat handwriting, his eyes locked on the short strings of numbers.

So… it had actually been exactly seventy-seven days since the night they had arrived on the Forgotten Shore. The three of them had scrupulously kept track of time for a while, but after their harrowing experience with the Soul Devourer, Sunny had lost the grasp on the actual count.

Out there in the real world, the spring was already starting. A whole season had passed.

…It felt like a lifetime.

Not paying any attention to the storm raging inside Sunny's heart, Harper closed the ledger and offered them a polite smile.

"All done. Now, leave your worries behind and follow me. Between these walls, you are completely safe. Nothing is going to hurt you!"

His tone was jovial, but Sunny didn't miss the quick glance Harper threw at the menacing guards standing silently by the sealed gate.

Chapter-135: Cohabitation

Harper led them through the castle, explaining small details about the rules and customs one had to follow once inside. He was a talkative and friendly guy, so Sunny quickly got the gist of it.

In general, it was very simple. They were free to do whatever they wanted unless it broke the basic rules of cohabitation, with a few small caveats. There were areas in the marble fortress open to everyone, and areas that only members of Gunlaug's host could enter. Those were marked by the symbol of a serpent coiled around a tall tower.

As they walked, Sunny noticed several crude tapestries with that symbol woven on them. The cloth of the tapestries was black, with a stylized white tower and a golden serpent embroidered in their center. He guessed that this represented the Dark City, the Bright Castle, and its lord respectively.

Apart from that, there wasn't much to know except for when and where to find food, water, and other necessities. The last thing Harper said was about how they should behave around other inhabitants of the fortress:

"People here are very nice, but you still must remember to have manners. Especially when you are interacting with the guards and the hunters. These guys protect us and risk their lives to provide for us, so they deserve our respect. If one of them… uh… if there's a misunderstanding, be mindful of their burdens. Yes."

Sunny threw a dark glance at the gaunt young man and translated that statement to "don't mess with Gunlaug's people, and if they are messing with you, just swallow it."

How wonderful.

Meanwhile, he was able to catch a few glimpses of how people actually lived inside the castle. To Sunny's surprise, they didn't seem nearly as put down and miserable as he had expected. In fact, everyone seemed to be more or less fine, going about their business with mundane casualness.

Of course, there were signs of worry, stress and pressure on their faces, but the same could be said about people in the real world. All in all, the inhabitants of the castle looked surprisingly… ordinary.

'I guess humans can adapt to anything.'

And as Changing Star had taught him, adaptability was the greatest strength.

As long as there was some semblance of stability, humans would find a way. And it seemed as though the tyrannical master of the ancient fortress, hateful as he was, was providing the Sleepers trapped on the Forgotten Shore with that stability. Effie's words about how the bastard was the only thing holding this place together echoed in Sunny's mind.

'Perhaps he's a... necessary evil?'

Finally, they reached the westernmost tower of the castle. Indeed, it was mostly empty and quiet. Few people seemed to want to stay here, driven away by the unnerving vision of the Crimson Spire looming in the distance.

However, for the two of them, it was perfect. Cassie couldn't see at all, while Sunny was long accustomed to the presence of the Spire because of his sensitivity to shadows. Plus, right now, all the windows in the tower were closed, hiding it from sight.

Harper suddenly stopped and said in a somewhat embarrassed tone:

"Uh… I forgot to ask. Would you guys be needing one room or two?"

Without thinking too much, Sunny and Cassie answered at the same time:

"One."

"Two."

Then, they froze and turned to each other with petrified expressions. Cassie blushed, while Sunny became even paler.

He didn't mean anything untoward by requesting a single room for the two of them. It's just that over the months spent camping together, being close to Cassie in case she needed help with something had become his habit. More importantly, he was unwilling to let her leave his sight even for a second in this unpredictable castle. He didn't trust anyone here.

But in these new circumstances, requesting a single room suggested a different meaning.

But there wasn't!

Clearing his throat, Sunny looked at Harper and said:

"Two rooms if they're next to each other. If that is not possible, then one."

The skittish young man scratched the back of his head, and then answered in a somewhat surprised tone:

"Uh… alright. I think I can find two adjacent rooms for you. Follow me."

With that, he began walking forward.

Sunny glanced at Cassie, then shook his head and followed behind Harper.

'She won't misunderstand. Right?'

Soon, they were standing in front of two sturdy wooden doors. Harper handed Sunny two iron keys and smiled.

"Here we are. The rooms are not very big, but they're really… uh… cozy. Enjoy your first night of safety, guys! You must have not felt safe in a long time. I know I never did before entering the castle. Thank heavens that time is behind me!

Anyway, food will be served one hour after sunrise tomorrow, in the main hall of the Keep. See you there!"

With that, he glanced at them one last time, smiled sheepishly, and walked away.

Sunny and Cassie were left alone in awkward silence.

Still feeling a little embarrassed, Sunny sighed and said:

"I hope you didn't think that I was…"

Cassie suddenly giggled.

"I know. I just didn't expect it. Let me guess, you distrust every single person in this castle, and therefore are going to watch me like a hawk to scare them all away. Like an overprotective, mean, violent big brother. Right?"

With a smile, she turned her head this way and another, and then added:

"To be honest, I don't feel safe here either. So, thank you! Although I must say, this place seems almost like a hotel. My parents took me on a mountain vacation once, and we stayed at a really old hotel. Uh, what was it called… Overgaze? Overlook?

Anyway, this place is exactly like that."

Sunny grinned.

"Right? I've never been to a hotel, but that was my first thought as well."

Of course, that was if the hotel in question was populated by hundreds of Nightmare Spell carriers, with a murderous tyrant for an owner, and not a single police officer around to call for help if something happened.

'Huh. Funny…'

Sunny had spent most of his life scared of the policemen and trying

to avoid them at all costs.

But now, he actually missed them a lot.

Chapter-136: Reflection

On the other side of the sturdy door, there was a tiny room with stone walls and a single, narrow window that was closed with wooden shutters and draped in thick cloth. Harper had warned them not to open the windows during the night, but out here in the Tower of Dusk, no one would want to stare at the view anyway.

Allowing any amount of light to seep out of the castle at night was considered to be a severe crime, so he had been pretty emphatic on that point. Of course, the gaunt young man didn't know that neither Sunny nor Cassie required light to move in the dark. They could open the windows as wide as they wanted… not that they had any reason to.

Inside the room, there was a bed with a straw mattress, a flimsy chest, and a tiny desk. On the desk, there was a basin filled with water, a few strips of clean cloth and an oil lamp.

There was even a small round mirror made of polished bronze.

Sunny caught a glimpse of his reflection and flinched, as though seeing a stranger.

In these past two months, he had seen himself through the eyes of the shadow plenty of times, but it wasn't the same.

He had changed a lot.

His face was much sharper and angular now, the last remnants of youthful roundness chased away from it by the harsh gauntlet of the Labyrinth… although Sunny never had a lot of that, to begin with. It was thin and pale, with dark circles under his eyes and other signs of extreme exhaustion. His black hair was longer, falling over his eyes in a dirty mess.

What changed the most, however, were the eyes themselves. Deep in their dark depths, there was a glint of calm, heavy, bleak coldness that had not been there before.

With a startling realization, Sunny understood that he, too, now possessed the look of a seasoned fighter. The type of calculating coldness hiding in the eyes of such men was known as the "murder math" in the outskirts.

Hero and Nephis had that quality, too. Only in their case, it made them seem like true warriors.

Sunny, on the other hand… Sunny had the eyes of a killer.

And even deeper than that, visible only to him, golden threads of Weaver's inhuman legacy glowed mysteriously in the darkness.

Staring at his reflection, Sunny grinned darkly and said in a strange, hoarse voice:

"...Looking good, Sunless."

***

Leaving his shadow to guard the door to Cassie's room, Sunny fell on the soft mattress, wrapped himself in a blanket, and tried to get himself to sleep.

Here in the safety of the mighty castle, surrounded by hundreds of people, lying on a real bed, it was hard to believe that just a few days ago he was traveling through the cursed darkness of the deadly sea on a rickety boat, fighting terrifying monsters in the bizarre landscape of the coral labyrinth, and losing his mind piece by piece to the gluttonous hunger of an ancient soul-devouring tree.

It all seemed like a feverish dream.

'This… isn't bad.'

With that thought, he fell asleep.

In the morning, washed and refreshed, he waited for Cassie in the

hallway. Even the Puppeteer's Shroud, which finally got a chance to return to the Soul Sea for a decently long period of time and restore itself, looked clean and tidy once again.

That poor armor had gone through enough abuse to kill a dozen Sleepers, yet it still held fast, saving his life on numerous occasions. Sunny was reminded of how lucky he had been to receive it.

The blind girl did not make him wait for long. Soon, she came out of her room, practically glowing with loveliness and freshness. It seemed as though Cassie had done the same things as Sunny,

After months spent crawling through blood and dirt in the wilderness, they finally looked and felt like humans again.

"Good morning!"

Sunny blinked.

He had almost forgotten how stunning Cassie was. With her delicate features, bright blue eyes and pale blond hair, she looked like a beautiful porcelain doll. The blind girl had dismissed the enchanted cloak, leaving her dressed only in a light tunic, with leather sandals on her feet. She was nothing short of breathtaking.

He closed his eyes and sighed.

'This… smells like trouble.'

"Good morning, Cassie."

She turned her head to him and wrinkled her nose. Sunny frowned:

"Uh… what?"

The blind girl knitted her brow.

"I don't know. You smell different."

He stared at her for a few moments, and then laughed.

"If this is your way of saying that I used to reek, then thank you, I

guess."

Giggling, Cassie came closer and put her hand on his shoulder.

"That's not what I meant! Anyway, let's go eat!"

The two of them were in a strangely good mood.

Sunny guided Cassie to the main keep of the castle, following the route that Harper had explained to them the previous evening. On the way, he was careful to avoid any doors and corridors marked with the symbol of the golden serpent coiled around a white tower.

His shadow was going to take a look at the forbidden areas of the fortress later, most likely. But for now, they had to keep a low profile and avoid trouble.

Finding the Keep was not hard, as many other Sleepers were going there to partake in the breakfast too. Meals were served twice a day in the castle, once in the morning and once right before sunset. If you missed one and had no other way to procure food, you would have to remain hungry for the rest of the day.

Sunny observed the Sleepers with curiosity, sometimes describing them to Cassie in a low voice. The inhabitants of the castle were very different from the desperate dwellers of the outer settlement. They generally seemed healthy, or at least well-fed. The amount of armor-type Memories here was also much higher, although many still wore clothes made of mundane fabrics.

Almost all of them were young and beautiful, with only a couple of the people he had seen looking like they were past their early twenties. Despite that, few could compare to Cassie in terms of looks.

Finally, they entered the main hall of the Keep, where long wooden tables were placed to accommodate the morning crowd of hungry Sleepers.

Suddenly, hundreds of eyes turned to stare at Cassie and Sunny.

Feeling cold shivers running down his spine, he gulped.

'Crap.'

Chapter-137: All Eyes on Me

The main hall of the mighty castle was grandiose and majestic in appearance. The gentle light of the morning sun was cascading through the tall windows and reflecting from the white marble walls, filling it with a bright radiance. The walls were decorated with intricate carvings that span dozens of meters, creating a regal tapestry.

At the far end of the hall, a set of stairs led to a dark alcove. The back wall of the alcove had numerous small holes cut through it, and with sunlight shining through them into the deep darkness, it seemed as though a fragment of the starlit night sky was somehow locked within the castle.

Beneath that light stood an empty white throne.

Sunny stared at the throne for a few moments, then lowered his gaze and glanced at the several hundred people that were looking at them.

Long wooden tables were placed along the length of the grand hall, with a motley crowd of Sleepers sitting on crude benches behind them, busy consuming their food. There was some sort of hierarchy in how they were grouped, but Sunny couldn't understand it yet.

Currently, most of them were staring in his direction.

Sunny gulped.

It took him a couple of seconds to realize that all these people were not, in fact, looking at him. They were all looking at Cassie, clearly startled by her loveliness.

'Crap.'

Just as he had thought, this smelled like trouble.

The blind girl, meanwhile, was oblivious to the commotion her appearance had caused. Sensing the sudden tension in his muscles, she asked:

"Sunny? Why did you stop?"

He narrowed his eyes, gave the crowd of Sleepers his most menacing scowl, and answered in a flat tone:

"Just taking in the view."

Then, Sunny walked over to the young women rationing the food, received two plates of steaming monster meat stew, and guided Cassie to a relatively empty spot at the end of one of the tables. He even got two cups of something that closely resembled tea.

Sitting down, he put the crudely made utensils into Cassie's hand and stared at his plate.

He didn't like all this attention one bit.

"Look at that, Cas! They even got vegetables. I swear there's at least two pieces of a… uh… tomato in my stew. Or is it a carrot? What's that thing that looks like a red potato?"

Sunny had only seen vegetables in the Academy's cafeteria, so he was not well-versed in differentiating them. Teacher Julius had also only mentioned them in passing, since the chances of encountering a vegetable from the real world in the Dream Realm were not very high.

To be precise, he had briefly showed Sunny pictures of the most common Earth vegetables and said that if he ever was to find something that makes him think "huh, that thing looks familiar!"... he should turn around and run.

Cassie smelled her stew and said with a smile.

"I think it's a beetroot."

Sunny blinked.

"...Never heard of it."

While they were innocently chatting, he was observing the Sleepers through his shadow, waiting tensely for things to go wrong.

And pretty soon, they did.

Sunny gritted his teeth when two rough-looking young men suddenly rose from their benches and headed across the hall toward them with unpleasant excitement burning in their eyes.

'Here we go.'

Who would have thought that the thing that landed him in trouble would be Cassie's beauty, of all things? Usually, it was either his sharp tongue or his general obnoxiousness.

Never, not even once, had it been his looks.

'Ouch. I shouldn't be jealous, right?'

The worst part was that the two approaching Sleepers were obviously a part of Gunlaug's gang. It was apparent from their armor and the fact that they carried their weapons in actual sheaths, like a pair of idiots. Memories could be freely summoned out of thin air, so the only reason to keep them visible at all times was for the sake of intimidation.

He had noted that detail after meeting the castle guards yesterday.

What had Harper said? If there is a "misunderstanding" with one of Gunlaug's people, remember that these guys carry a heavy burden. Treat them with respect.

In other words, swallow it.

The young men approached their corner of the table with vulgar smiles. They were clearly undressing Cassie with their eyes. Sunny turned his head and looked up at them.

The Sleepers sitting nearby turned away with heavy looks, clearly afraid and uncomfortable.

'Maybe they just want to say hi.'

Sunny opened his mouth...

'Respectful… remember… be respectful…'

...and said:

"What the fuck are you degenerates staring at?"

***

The whole hall was suddenly enveloped in silence. Once again, Sunny had found himself in the center of attention.

But this time, everyone was actually staring at him instead of Cassie.

'I… guess that's better?'

The few nearby Sleepers who had pretended to not notice anything a few seconds earlier lowered their heads, as though trying to become smaller and disappear completely.

Sunny glanced at them with disdain and turned back to the pair of young men who were currently towering above him, a dark and dangerous light dancing in their eyes.

To be honest, his incendiary reaction had caught Sunny by surprise. The anger had taken the better of him for a moment, forcing the words out of his mouth. But the damage had already been done.

It seemed as though his brotherly instincts were not only still alive, but also somewhat overwhelming.

'To hell with this. They want to see dark and dangerous? I'll show them.'

He glared at the two idiots, knowing that, at this point, there was no way back. Beside him, Cassie turned her head, an alarmed expression on her face.

One of the idiots grinned.

"Huh. We were just hoping to politely introduce ourselves to this lovely little doll, but hey, we can get acquainted with the ugly little clown first. How about it?"

He glanced at the other Sleeper, who was looking at Sunny with no humor in his eyes whatsoever.

Cassie frowned, then said:

"Why are you…"

However, at that moment, the second young man took a step forward and growled, interrupting her:

"What did you just say, clown? Do you know who we are? Fool, we're Gunlaug's men."

His hand was resting on the pommel of his sword.

Sunny knew that escalating the situation was not a wise thing to do, but at this point, he didn't have a choice. Backing down now would only lead to a disaster. He knew this type of people well: the moment they felt a weakness, it was all over.

They understood only two things — fear and strength.

Outstretching one hand, he scowled, looked the young men right into the eyes, and said:

"Congratulations. Now get lost before I make you dead men."

Perhaps recognizing something in his voice, or maybe in his eyes, the Sleeper who had his hand on the pommel of the sword hesitated. For a second, Sunny almost believed that his threat worked. But then the young man furtively glanced around, and this tiny hope evaporated.

If they were alone, maybe the Sleeper would have reconsidered his desire to antagonize Sunny any further. But with all these people watching, he couldn't show fear.

Sunny failed to account for one crucial detail. All bullies were cowards… but what they feared the most was people finding out

about their cowardice.

Gunlaug's man bared his teeth in a threatening grin.

"Those are terribly big words, coming from a puny weakling like you. You know what? I think your girl needs to keep better company. Why don't we help her out by making you disappear?"

Sunny smiled.

'...I guess I'm going to kill a couple of fools today.'

Cassie, meanwhile, was not happy with what was happening at all. The frown on her face deepened.

"I'll decide what company to keep myself. Now, please…"

However, they weren't listening to her.

Sunny was already bracing himself for the worst-case scenario, prepared to summon the Midnight Shard at a moment's notice.

But then, suddenly, a calm voice sounded from behind his back.

"Leave them alone, please. They are my friends."

Caught by surprise, Sunny hurriedly shifted his perspective to the shadow and glanced back.

Behind him, a tall and confident young man stood calmly with his hands resting at his hips. He had brown hair and a gentle, handsome face. His eyes sparkled with friendly humor.

It was…

'Caster?!'

Chapter-138: Unexpected Reunion

Without a doubt, it was Caster — the only person Sunny had ever seen defeat Nephis in a fight, even if it was just during training.

Back at the Academy, Caster had been a star of their batch of Sleepers. Handsome and friendly, he was not only popular, but also respected. And although it pained Sunny to admit it, that wasn't only because of his lofty status of a Legacy.

Even other Legacies looked up to him. Many even considered him to be the true king of the rankings, speculating that Changing Star had gotten her first place by mistake.

Caster was powerful, skilled, and charming. He was also humble and had an amiable personality that made it hard for anyone not to like him. His background was impeccable, and his future was unquestionably bright.

Basically, he was the polar opposite of Sunny.

'Damn! I knew that voice sounded familiar!'

Sunny turned his head and stared at the handsome young man in utter bewilderment.

What was that guy doing here?

The two Sleepers who didn't even know how close they had come to tasting the sharp edge of the Midnight Shard were doing the same. There was no more excitement on their faces.

"Oh. It's you."

'That was my line!'

Caster looked at them with a silent smile. There was no apparent hostility in his eyes, but for some reason, Gunlaug's men seemed to lose their desire to stir trouble. After glancing at each other, one of them said in a hesitant tone:

"You know this guy, Caster?"

He gave them a nod.

"Yeah. We were in the Academy together. Don't mind his rude behavior, guys — that's just how he is. Rough around the edges, but really nice once you get to know him well."

'Since when do we know each other?'

Sunny was irrationally angry at that statement, but forced himself to keep his mouth shut. He understood that Caster was just trying to defuse the situation. Actually, his arrival had been very timely.

Sunny was sure of his ability to dispatch a couple of thugs… but what would happen next? He doubted that other members of Gunlaug's host would just sit and watch.

Becoming involved in a conflict with the masters of the castle on his first day here would have been less than ideal.

The thugs in question, meanwhile, had given up. Trying to keep the appearance of being in control, they glared at Caster darkly and backed down.

"Teach your friend some manners, Caster. Next time we won't be so lenient."

With that, they turned around and retreated back to their seats, throwing menacing looks at anyone who dared to stare at them. Soon, the grand hall was once again filled with the hum of voices.

Caster followed them with his eyes and then turned to Sunny, his smile becoming a little somber.

"That… wasn't a very smart thing to do, my friend."

Sunny scoffed.

"Yeah, well… who says that I'm smart?"

'Wait, no, that didn't come out right!'

The tall young man stared at him for a few seconds and then sighed.

"In any case, it is very nice to see you. Both of you."

With that, he sat down, as though somebody had invited him.

Well… admittedly, there was some connection between them. Wishing to talk to people with whom you had attended Academy was sort of understandable.

Still, Sunny didn't like it.

Throwing a quick glance at Cassie, he smiled coldly and said:

"What? Are you very shocked to see us alive?"

Caster hesitated.

"It is good that you managed to survive."

It seemed that this was his way of admitting that yes, he was surprised, but in a pleasant way.

It wasn't a secret that Sunny and Cassie had been seen as two walking corpses by all the other Sleepers in the Academy. Just like Nephis and Caster occupied the top two positions in the rankings, they were dead last. Because of that, the two of them had been shunned and ostracized.

Of course, when it came to Sunny, he not only welcomed the cold treatment of his peers, but had actually been the one to engineer it.

In any case, no one had wanted to be around them, as though afraid of becoming infected by the invisible aura of death that followed them wherever they went. Sunny himself had been guilty of avoiding

Cassie as much as he could in the past.

It must have been very strange to see the two of them alive and well after months spent among the horrors of the Forgotten Shore.

Cassie smiled.

"Thank you."

Caster reciprocated her smile and asked, his tone strangely warm:

"You are Cassia, right? And you are… uh… Sunless?"

Sunny gave him a curt nod.

"Right. Although I'm surprised that you remember our names. Don't think that we've forgotten how you guys used to treat us."

Cassie squeezed his hand and said in a disapproving tone:

"Sunny!"

Caster chuckled.

"No, no. He's right. We behaved like a bunch of jerks. Looking back… there were a lot of things we did wrong. If only we had known better…"

His voice trailed off, and after being silent for some time, the handsome young man suddenly smiled with nostalgia.

"But still, those days in the Academy were not all bad, right? Heh, I still remember the first time I met you, Sunless. You made quite an impression! All those tall tales: spitting in the faces of awakened tyrants, slaying sword saints with a shake of a finger…"

He chuckled, remembering the good old days.

Sunny grinned.

He was in the mood for some mischief.

"What, that trivial stuff? Ha! Child's games. You should have seen the

things I've done in the Labyrinth. Now that's something to brag about."

Caster looked at him with humorous sparks dancing in his eyes.

"Oh? Well… do tell. What else have you done?"

Sunny shrugged with profuse indifference.

"This and that. Let's see…"

He pretended to think for a few moments, and then said in a bored tone:

"I guess the most incredible thing I've done was killing a Great Devil with just one strike of my sword. Finished him right off, no problem at all. I even got a Memory from that kill. Uh, but before you ask — no, I can't show it to you. Because, uh… ugh… oh, right. I ate it…"

Chapter-139: The Incredible Adventures and Astonishing Deeds of Heroic Dreamer Sunless and His Beautiful Female Companions Princess Nephis and Lady Cassia, Abridged (Volume I)

Caster stared at him for a long time, then suddenly laughed. Even Cassie giggled, entertained by Sunny's earnest delivery.

Shaking his head, the handsome young man smiled and said:

"I see your sense of humor did not change. Good, that is good. Few people manage to preserve it here."

Sunny blinked a couple of times and said, pretending to be offended:

"What do you mean, sense of humor? It's the honest truth."

He received another bout of laughter instead of an answer.

'...There was food, safety, and laughter,' he thought suddenly, remembering how Cassie had described the Bright Castle after dreaming of it for the first time.

She had also seen Sunny leading her through its gates. Her prophetic visions were turning out to be frighteningly accurate.

'Makes you wonder about that other vision she saw…'

Not allowing himself to become distracted, Sunny chased away the ominous feeling and hid a smile. Then, with a shrug, he scoffed.

"Well, don't believe me if you don't want to. That was just one of my many adventures, anyway.

Although the other ones were, admittedly, less remarkable — you know, the usual stuff: slaying dozens of awakened creatures, being resurrected from the doors of death by a beautiful princess, summoning ancient horrors from the depths of the cursed sea, outsmarting ancient fiends to escape from their clutches, sailing through the abyss on a boat made of demon bones, fighting gargantuan leviathans underwater, and so forth.

Mundane crap like that."

As he was talking, Cassie gradually stopped laughing and turned to him with a somewhat startled expression on her face. It seemed as though it was only now, with the harrowing journey already behind them, that she had finally realized how outlandish it all actually was.

Put together, the facts of their bloody struggle to survive sounded like something out of a fairy tale. But they both knew that all of that had actually happened.

It had happened to them.

Caster chuckled.

"Wow. Compared to you, Sunny, my own story sounds kind of lame. I just entered the Dream Realm near the city wall and spent a few days running away from a bunch of terrifying monsters, then stumbled on a hunting party from the Castle, and that's pretty much it."

He sighed.

"By the way, when did you guys arrive? I'm sure I haven't seen you around before."

There was no reason to lie, and Sunny couldn't anyway. Looking longingly at his monster stew, which was slowly growing cold, he sighed and said:

"We reached the Dark City two days ago, and entered the castle yesterday at dusk."

The handsome Legacy stared at him, then blinked a couple of times:

"Wait… wait… what do you mean? Did you guys really spend two months in the Labyrinth?"

'Uh-oh.'

Finally, the moment he had been wary of came. Sunny really didn't want for anyone to think that he was some kind of a powerful figure. First of all, there was no better advantage than being underestimated by the enemy. Secondly, he still had to hide the fact that Changing Star had not been the only one to receive a True Name in the First Nightmare.

Luckily, he had long thought of an exceptionally convincing excuse.

…When in trouble, blame everything on Nephis.

Laughing inwardly, Sunny pretended to shiver and sighed.

"Yeah. I don't even want to think about it. That place… it's pure hell. Honestly, if it wasn't for Changing Star, both of us would have been long dead."

She wouldn't have survived without his help, too, but Caster didn't need to know that.

Sunny was pretty sure that mentioning Neph's name anywhere near the names of two losers like Cassie and him were believed to be would make anyone think that she had single-handedly carried the both of them to safety on her back.

As it turns out, he was right.

As soon as he mentioned Nephis, something changed on Caster's face. With a strange look in his eyes, the handsome man leaned forward a little and asked in a deceptively calm tone:

"Changing… Lady Nephis is alive? She is here?"

He had already forgotten all about how unlikely it was for someone like Sunny to survive a long journey through the deadly nightmare of the Labyrinth.

Sunny narrowed his eyes slightly. Caster's reaction was a little bit more intense than he had anticipated. It was on the border of being weird.

But then again, the tall and handsome Legacy had seemed to be strangely enamored with Nephis even back at the Academy.

'You bastard!'

Enraged for some unknown reason, Sunny gritted his teeth and said:

"Yeah. She's around."

Turning her head slightly in his direction, Cassie hesitated for a moment, and then added:

"We… we only had two soul shards when we came to the castle. So she is staying in the outer settlement. For now."

Caster leaned back, a hint of disappointment appearing on his face for a fraction of a second. Then, he inhaled deeply and said:

"I see. I see."

Sunny took a sip of his tea and asked:

"Why are you so interested in Nephis all of a sudden?"

The handsome young man looked at him with surprise.

"What? Oh. I'm… I'm just glad to know that more of us survived."

Then, he sighed and shook his head:

"From what I was able to learn, there were no more than seven Sleepers sent to the Forgotten Shore by the Spell this year. Up until today, I thought that I was the only one to survive. It's good… it's good to know that I was wrong."

Caster's face grew solemn.

"If Lady Nephis was with you, that explains how you have managed to reach the Bright Castle alive. But the other three… I'm afraid that they are long dead. May their souls rest in peace."

Sunny and Cassie lowered their heads, coming to terms with this new information. It was true that they had not been treated well by the rest of the Sleepers in the Academy. Still, it was also somewhat heartbreaking to know that several of the kids they had known, even if it was just for a short amount of time, were now gone, killed by the vicious crucible of the Dream Realm.

The cruel and ruthless Nightmare Spell had taken its first victims.

Who would be next?

Without having to look at each other, they quietly repeated Caster's words:

"...May their souls rest in peace."

Chapter-140: True Legacy

Some time passed in silence, with each of them thinking about what their own fates would be in this cursed place. Finally, Sunny extricated himself from this dark reverie and asked:

"So you've been here all this time? How are you able to afford to live in the castle? Don't tell me that you have joined this… this golden serpent's army."

Caster sighed.

"No… no, I didn't. Although I'm going to lie if I say that I haven't been tempted to. One way or the other, all roads here lead to Gunlaug and his men. I don't think there's more than a handful of powerful Sleepers who have managed to remain independent. Currently, I'm one of them."

Sunny stared at him a repeated his question:

"How so?"

The handsome young man shrugged.

"My Aspect Ability gives me a certain advantage when it comes to escaping the clutches of the Nightmare Creatures. Not so much with killing them, though. I went on a few hunting expeditions with other independent hunters… but that was a mistake. We barely escaped alive. Still, it landed me a few soul shards. The rest I got from selling a couple of Memories."

Right… unlike them normal people, the proud Legacy had entered the Dream Realm with an entire arsenal of Memories that his clan had prepared for him. He had also started with a somewhat considerable amount of soul essence already absorbed, although it wouldn't have been too much.

Unlike Memories, which could be brought back to the real world by anyone, actual soul shards were physical objects, and as such, only Masters and Saints were able to transport them — because they traveled between realms physically, and not just in spirit like Sleepers and Awakened.

That meant that even rich Legacy clans couldn't afford to feed too much soul essence to their scions in advance. Masters were a rare breed, after all, let alone Saints.

In any case, Caster had it better than anyone else on the Forgotten Shore. His ancestral Memories were enough to buy him months, perhaps even years of a tranquil life in the castle. He could use this time to learn the ins and outs of the Dark City to become an independent hunter or reconsider his position and join Gunlaug's host eventually.

Even in this hell, his background gave him an enormous advantage.

'Lucky bastard…'

…But that still didn't explain why those thugs were so unwilling to get on his bad side.

Sunny frowned.

"Why were Gunlaug's men afraid of you?"

Caster looked at him with irony.

"Those two? Oh, right. You have just arrived at the Castle. Well… basically, there are different kinds of people serving Gunlaug. The guys you have so carelessly offended are members of the Castle Guard. They are at the bottom of the totem pole.

They are also the weakest and have little to no real battle experience. What minor reputation I have is enough to make them think twice before messing with me."

For a second, there was a dangerous gleam in his eyes. Because of Caster's amiable personality, when talking to him, it was easy to forget what the word Legacy really meant. Legacies were trained to

fight and kill since they could barely walk. Every one of them was a true powerhouse. Sunny had no doubt that Caster's actual reputation in the castle was not as negligible as he would have them believe.

After all, he was the only human… no, actually, the only being Sunny knew of that had managed to defeat Nephis in combat. And in terms of personal power, Nephis was as high as one could get in Sunny's heart.

No one else could even compare.

He was also sure that Caster's reputation was earned by spilling blood.

'I really… really hope that I won't have to face this guy in battle one day,' Sunny thought, feeling a cold sensation that he desperately hoped was not a premonition.

With a sigh, he tried to hide this unease and asked:

"So I shouldn't be worried about their retaliation?"

The amiable young man gave him a nod.

"The two guards you have humiliated might try to do something on their own, but there won't be any reaction from the Host itself. But I doubt that they will. Just don't antagonize them any further."

He suddenly grew serious.

"However, if they were Hunters or, even worse, one of the Pathfinders… even my name would not have protected you. You'd simply be dead. So, please, watch your actions in the future. This castle… in a sense, it can be as dangerous as the city outside. Especially for someone with your… uh… temperament."

'What's that supposed to mean?!'

Sunny wanted to bite back, but then closed his mouth.

…Yeah, he really did have a temperament that attracted trouble. Guilty as charged.

While he was reconsidering his life choices, Cassie suddenly spoke in a quiet voice:

"Caster… is there really no way out of here?"

The proud Legacy looked at her and remained silent for a long time, a somber expression finding its way to his face. His eyes were heavy and bleak.

After a while, he sighed and said:

"None that any of us can ever hope to reach, Cassia. As it is right now, this is where we have to live. Maybe… maybe something will change in the future. But for now, just take care of yourself and try to survive."

Standing up, he glanced at them one last time and smiled:

"It was so nice to see you, guys. Really. I'll leave you to your food now, if that's okay. If you need anything in the future, don't hesitate to come find me. My quarters are in the Tower of Dawn."

'Quarters… of course that miscreant has "quarters"...'

With that, Caster left, letting Sunny finally get to his stew, which was barely warm by that point.

'Great! Breakfast is ruined!' he thought angrily, drilling two holes in the tall Sleeper's back. 'His fault! It's all his fault, not mine. Yeah, definitely…'

***

Some time later, Sunny was lying on his bed with his eyes closed. The Tower of Dusk was calm and quiet.

It was time to send his shadow on a walk…

Chapter-141: Golden Serpent

Over the next five days, Sunny mostly stayed in his room while his shadow stealthily prowled around the castle, spying on people and learning their secrets.

Slowly, he began to understand the undercurrents that flowed beneath the seemingly peaceful surface of life in this pristine white fortress.

Of course, in reality, things weren't peaceful at all — and as far from pure as one could imagine. But that was to be expected from a place where hundreds of lost youths lived with no hope of ever finding their way back home, away from all the restraints of civilization.

He wasn't surprised at all. If anything, it was strange to see some semblance of law and order, no matter how detestable and revolting, persevere despite all the obstacles that stood in the way. Somehow, the inhabitants of the castle were able to coexist with each other in a fragile balance.

The system was cleverly built in a way that allowed the abused to dream of a better life and restrained the abusers from going too far. Better life meant winning Gunlaug's favor, while going too far meant losing it and being banished into the cold darkness of the outer settlement.

Both fear and hope were created and firmly grasped by the Bright Lord. Their mere existence kept people in their places. Sunny suspected that the same dynamic, just substituted for a different kind of reality, reigned in the slum outside of the castle walls.

The outer settlement seemed to exist separate from the castle, but in fact, both were simply parts of one large ecosystem.

People on the outside longed to be allowed inside, while people on

the inside dreaded being exiled to the outside. Because the possibility of a better life — or a worse one — existed, they were distracted from the fact that, no matter what happened, they would still be spinning in a circle.

Like a serpent biting its own tail, the Bright Castle and the outer settlement created a closed cycle of exploitation and abuse that, paradoxically, kept everyone in the Dark City sane and alive.

It was nothing short of ingenious.

…Of course, Sunny wanted no part of it.

He didn't know how many people were currently surviving in the slum, but there were somewhere around five hundred Sleepers living in the ancient stronghold. However, not all of them shared the same status. There was a complex hierarchy in place, separating people into different castes. Some of these groups had a distinct place in the hierarchy, while others were less clearly defined.

Most of the inhabitants of the castle, unsurprisingly, were directly serving Gunlaug. They were Guards, Hunters, Pathfinders, Artisans, and Handmaidens. Ruling over them were five lieutenants who answered directly to the lord himself, each responsible for their own aspect of the day-to-day life of the fortress.

The Castle Guard was the largest of these groups, consisting of around one hundred and fifty men. They were in charge of guarding the stronghold and enforcing Gunlaug's laws. Just like Caster had said, they were near the bottom of the totem pole in terms of power and status.

Anyone with a remotely useful Aspect Ability could join the Guard, and although their training was rather rigorous, actual opportunities to experience combat were few and far between. That was not to say that their job was not dangerous: every time a stray Nightmare Creature climbed the hill or attacked from above, it was their duty to either kill or chase the monster away.

And out here in the Dark City, no monster was anything less than terrifying and absolutely deadly.

The Castle Guard was led by a morose giant of a man named Tessai, who was one of Gunlaug's most trusted lieutenants and perhaps the oldest Sleeper on the Forgotten Shore — he was just two years short of thirty. Tessai was a ferocious fighter and ruthless commander, holding his subordinates in an iron grip.

Above the Castle Guard, there were Hunters. These were the elites of Gunlaug's forces, each possessing a powerful combat Aspect, rich battle experience, and sharp wit to make use of both. There were around fifty of them, divided into seven hunting parties.

Each morning, as soon as the gates of the castle opened, one of the parties left the safety of the impregnable marble walls and ventured into the harrowing maze of the Dark City to hunt and kill Awakened creatures. It was thanks to their efforts that people in the ancient stronghold had food on their plates. Without them, none of this would have been possible.

Hunters were recruited from the ranks of Guards, and becoming a Hunter was a dream come true. That was because these professionals enjoyed plentiful rewards from the lord, such as living in a room of their own as opposed to cramped barracks, better food and access to various luxury items, best Memories and tools the Bright Castle could provide… as well as many other things.

Of course, the other side of the coin was that their lives were often the shortest. Despite all their experience and preparations, many never returned from the hunts.

And the only reason any did at all was the Pathfinders.

Pathfinders served as guides for the hunting parties. Just as Effie had said, the secret to surviving in the Dark City was to find and kill comparatively weaker creatures without stumbling into something far more deadly. They made sure to do just that — track the Awakened monsters without leading the pack of Hunters into the jaws of Fallen abominations.

There were so few Pathfinders that Sunny even questioned whether they could be categorized as a group. In the whole castle, there were less than a dozen. Each of them was a seasoned veteran who earned

his role through surviving long years of bloody battles in the ruins, and thus had a chance to live long enough to learn large areas of the Dark City like his own five fingers.

Needless to say, all of them were incredibly fearsome combatants and enjoyed lavish, sometimes even decadent lifestyles.

Both Hunters and Pathfinders were led by a charismatic man called Gemma. Gemma came to the Forgotten Shore in the same year as Gunlaug, and had helped him take control of the castle.

Together, these three groups — Guards, Hunters, and Pathfinders — formed Gunlaug's army, which was simply known as the Host.

Chapter-142: Behind the Scenes

There were two other groups of people that belonged to Gunlaug.

The first of them consisted of Sleepers with useful Utility Abilities and their helpers. These people, known as Artisans, played a very important role in the life of the castle. They were responsible for creating and maintaining various items that were either vital to survival or made existing on the Forgotten shore less unbearable, such as clothes, tools, equipment, utensils, and various gear.

Each Artisan had a small team of less gifted Sleepers helping them craft the necessary items. All in all, there were around a hundred of them in total, with most of that number consisting of the assistants. They were led by a young woman called Kido, who was a talented manager and had an Ability that allowed her to change attributes of certain plants.

The vegetables in Sunny's stew came from her garden. Since such an Ability was nothing short of priceless on the Forgotten Shore, where food was scarce and mostly homogenous, it wasn't surprising that she had become one of the lieutenants despite being much younger than the rest of them.

The status of Artisans was somewhat of a tense subject in the Bright Castle. Because they were largely non-combatants, Guards felt that their position should be inferior to that of people actually risking their lives in vicious battles against Nightmare Creatures.

Artisans, on the contrary, believed that the rarity of Utility Aspects and the vital role they played in maintaining the living conditions inside the castle should land them more prestige than the Castle Guard, which basically recruited any random nobody, enjoyed. This conflict had been simmering for a long time, and was not going to be resolved anytime soon.

Funnily enough, Hunters, who risked their lives the most, did not care about the issue one way or another. Their leader Gemma, however, was silently supporting the Artisans and their chief, Kido — which prevented the Guards from being too forceful in their argument.

The last group of people who belonged to Gunlaug was the Handmaidens. These were the young women Sunny had seen quietly performing various chores around the castle, like making sure that windows were properly closed before the onset of the night or preparing and handing out food during mealtime.

They were responsible for maintaining the castle itself, as well as serving the high-ranking members of the Host. There were also around a hundred of them.

From what Sunny knew about the world, these poor girls should have been the prime victims of abuse within the walls of the ancient stronghold, but to his surprise, they were actually strangely revered, and even a little feared. The main reason for this was their leader, a mysterious and strikingly beautiful woman known as Seishan.

Seishan not only took care of her Handmaidens, but also secretly taught them how to defend themselves. The exact extent of their training was unknown, but Sunny clearly saw that members of the Castle Guard were very careful to behave themselves around Handmaidens… most of the time.

The other reason was that, like everything else in the castle, the young women technically belonged to Gunlaug, and Gunlaug was very particular about people laying hands on his belongings without permission. Even if some foolish Guard was brave enough to anger Seishan, no one with a desire to live was willing to get on the bad side of the Bright Lord.

…Sunny, however, was already scared enough by Seishan herself. The first time he had sent his shadow to take a look at what the Handmaidens were up to when no one was watching, it had almost gotten caught.

That was the first time someone managed to sense his shadow. One

moment, beautiful Seishan was calmly standing with her back to the shaded corner where it was concealed, giving instructions to one of her subordinates, and in the next, she suddenly turned around and looked directly at the hiding shadow.

Not knowing what else to do, Sunny shut his eyes and shifted all of his perception back. He was fairly sure that no one would be able to directly see the shadow — after all, his innate stealth enhancement was even more pronounced when it came to his silent companion.

However, there were a lot of different Aspects. Many Awakened, for example, were able to feel when someone was looking at them. Praying that this was the case here, Sunny waited for a while before cautiously opening one eye.

Luckily, this time, he didn't cause too much of a commotion. Confirming that Seishan had returned to her conversation, he hurriedly sent the shadow away and made sure to stay away from the mysterious beauty, and her Handmaidens in general, ever since.

The last hundred people in the castle were those who paid tribute, but didn't serve Gunlaug directly. There was no real name for this group, so Sunny simply called them "tenants" in his mind.

There were two types of tenants: a smaller number of them were those who were able to make a decent living by providing Gunlaug's men with various services, mostly having to do with craftsmanship and entertainment. For example, the was a man who created something akin to a music lounge, another one who operated a small theatre troupe, and even an entrepreneurial girl who owned a gambling den.

A larger number of tenants were people like Harper — those who had entered the castle through luck and remained there by the skin of their teeth, desperately trying to earn soul shards for tribute by acting as servants and doing various menial jobs.

These poor folks were at the very bottom of the social hierarchy of the castle.

…And on the opposite side of that hierarchy, there was the golden

serpent, the master of the castle, Bright Lord Gunlaug himself.

The man who, by Effie's description, was nearly immortal.

On his fifth day in the ancient stronghold, Sunny had finally laid eyes on this loathsome tyrant.

He didn't like what he saw at all.

Chapter-143: Gunlaug

Despite the fact that Gunlaug's heavy presence permeated every centimeter of the castle, the Bright Lord himself was strangely elusive. He didn't show himself often, preferring to rule through his five proxies. Whether it was out of arrogance, paranoia or some other reason, Sunny did not know.

After the incident with Seishan, he was afraid to let his shadow walk too freely and tried to avoid going anywhere near the fearsome master of the ancient stronghold. Because of these precautions, he had not seen Gunlaug until their fifth day in the castle.

As it turned out, when Golden Serpent did show up, he liked to leave an impression.

Sunny and Cassie were about to receive their usual breakfast when the whole grand hall suddenly grew deathly silent. Feeling that something was wrong, they turned to the entrance — just in time to see a torrent of Guards pouring inside.

Sunny's heart skipped a beat.

'What's this?'

Fearing for the worst, he tried to think of the best way to escape… but luckily, the menacing soldiers of the Host paid them no attention. Instead, they quickly dispersed around the hall and moved the long tables to the walls, creating a large open space in the middle.

Cassie grasped Sunny's shoulder and whispered:

"What is going on?"

He hesitated, then answered uncertainly:

"I'm not sure…"

Suddenly, he caught sight of Caster standing among the crowd. The handsome young man had a solemn look on his face. His gaze was turned to the dark alcove at the far end of the hall.

One by one, all the Sleepers turned to face the same direction. Sunny followed their example.

Slowly, five figures stepped out of the darkness of the alcove and stood at the steps leading up to the throne. They were Gemma, Tessai, Seishan, Kido, and the last of the five lieutenants.

When Sunny noticed him, an involuntary shudder run through his body.

The fifth lieutenant had no official duties in the Bright Castle, but everyone here feared him the most. It was a strange, pale man with a bony face and glassy, emotionless eyes. His spine was twisted, making him appear deceptively short.

The hunchback was wearing simple black clothes with no adornments and holding himself with a bit of awkwardness, as though uncomfortable with all the attention.

His name was Harus, and he was Bright Lord's hidden blade and executioner. When someone needed to be disposed of, he was sent to carry out the punishment. If Gunlaug wanted everyone to know about his displeasure, there would be rivers of blood left in his wake. If not, there wouldn't be even a single drop.

People would just disappear, as though they had never existed.

Harus was Gunlaug's murderous shadow.

Many of the inhabitants of the castle had seen nightmares in which they awoke only to see his glassy, cold eyes staring at them from the darkness. For some, those nightmares became a reality. Harus was willing and eager to follow any command of his master, no matter how vile.

What disturbed Sunny the most, however, was that looking at Harus

was like looking at a dark mirror. Despite the fact that they were almost nothing alike, for some reason, he couldn't help but recognize traces of himself in the sadistic butcher.

Or, to be precise, of a possible future version of himself.

'N—no way… I am… I am much more pleasant on the eye.'

Forcing himself to look away before the hunchback felt his stare, Sunny turned his head and looked at the tall man who had finally appeared from the darkness.

At least he assumed that it was a man, and not some golden demon.

Bright Lord Gunalug was clad in a strange, gilded armor that covered his tall figure from head to toe, not leaving even his eyes exposed. It seemed simultaneously solid and liquid, almost flowing over his mighty muscles and broad, powerful shoulders.

In the place where his face should have been, a smooth and empty expanse of polished gold reflected the frightened faces of hundreds of Sleepers back at them. Sunny saw his own reflection staring at him and suddenly realized how small and weak he was in front of this brilliant giant.

His legs trembled.

The pressure Gunlaug exerted on the space around him was almost palpable. All the people near Sunny were going through a similar kind of experience as him. Their faces were pale, their eyes wide, drops of sweat appearing on their temples. Even the lieutenants seemed slightly uncomfortable, affected by this oppressive aura just like the rest of them.

'God… damn… it… that's not an aura, that's a mind attack!'

Protected by the [Doubtless] trait of the Puppeteer's Shroud, Sunny was more resistant to such attacks than most. Gritting his teeth, he shook off the effects of Gunlaug's psychic pressure and drew in a deep breath. Then, he glanced at Cassie, concerned about her well-being.

To his surprise, the blind girl was doing absolutely fine. Unlike the

rest of them, she wasn't showing any signs of distress. Sunny stared at her and blinked a couple of times.

'The reflection… this all started when I saw my reflection in the visor of that bastard's weird armor… but Cassie is blind, so…'

It seemed as though Gunlaug wasn't actually attacking them. It was just an enchantment of that strange golden armor of his. Whoever looked at its mirror-like face was immediately assaulted by a crippling feeling of awe, dread, and the crushing desire to submit.

'What… what kind of a Memory can practically paralyze several hundred people just from its passive effect?' Sunny thought, astonished.

How was this possible?

Meanwhile, Gunlaug approached the empty white throne and gracefully sat down. The light falling from the numerous holes in the back wall of the alcove reflected from his armor, making it appear as though he was enveloped by a bright radiance.

The golden mirror that served him as a face turned to gaze at the rows of Sleepers trembling at his feet.

A few moments later, a deep and insidious voice resounded from all around them, as though the castle itself was whispering into their ears:

"Ah, what a nice day it is today. A perfect day for justice, don't you think, my precious wards? I've heard that there's a criminal hiding among us today. Well… am I not fair? Am I not just? Let me show you how just I am…"

Chapter-144: Right of Challenge

Sunny felt cold sweat running down his back. Shaken by Gunlaug's serpentine voice, he was tempted to fall to his knees and beg for forgiveness. However, he also understood that every person in the grand hall currently felt the same urge.

Everyone here had done something that might be considered a crime by the tyrant.

He almost expected to hear people begin confessing their sins, but at that moment, a strange commotion at the doors attracted his attention.

Moving with menacing determination, two guards dragged a man to the center of the hall and threw him on the floor. The man was dressed in rags and painfully lean, which betrayed his nature as a dweller of the outer settlement.

However, there were ropes of powerful muscles rolling under his thin skin, and an angry, fearless look in his eyes that made the man appear proud and defiant. Throwing a contemptuous stare at the guards, he picked himself up from the floor and stood up, his back straight and his head held high. There was no ounce of fear on his face. Instead, there was dark, furious resentment.

Gunlaug looked down on the brave man from his throne and slightly tilted his head. The outsider grimaced after seeing his reflection in the golden mask, but still didn't lower his head.

'That's pure willpower,' Sunny thought, impressed by the stranger.

Meanwhile, Bright Lord's voice resounded in the grand hall once again:

"My wards. We have a guest today. This man, called Jubei, is visiting

us from the outer settlement. Recently, he had been heard leveraging an accusation against one of my men. As a just and benevolent lord, I have invited Jubei here to plead his case and expose the criminal. We must get to the bottom of this matter!

After all, the law is our only guiding star in this dark world…"

Despite being free from the psychic pressure emanated by Gunlaug's armor, Sunny still felt strangely affected by his deep, soft voice. He even got goosebumps. With or without the golden Memory, Bright Lord possessed a powerful and ingratiating charisma. It was hard not to listen to him.

But the man called Jubei just smirked.

"That's right. I'm here to accuse one of your thugs, Gunlaug. Let's see how you'll get out of this one, bastard."

With that, he raised one hand and pointed a finger at the group of Hunters watching the proceeding from their usual corner of the grand hall.

"That man right there, one of your so-called Pathfinders, is guilty of murder. He had killed an innocent kid in the most repugnant of ways. I've been watching you and your minions commit all sorts of vile crimes over these years, but enough is enough. Today, I'll see him answer with his life for what he did!"

A wave of shocked whispers ran through the crowd. Accusing a Pathfinder was not something a sane person would ever do. Due to their venerated status, these men were nearly untouchable. And yet, Jubei seemed unrelenting.

Gunlaug spoke:

"...Is that so? That is a heavy accusation, Jubei. Please, tell us more."

The man from the outer settlement gritted his teeth.

"That scum and his people lured a naive kid into their party by promising him all kinds of rewards and riches. They told him that he is going to become one of them and come to live in your damn castle.

But in reality, they just fed him to the monsters as bait!"

He spat on the floor.

"You dare to call yourself Hunters, you damn cowards?! Don't you have any shame?!"

A heavy silence settled in the grand hall. People were now staring at the group of Hunters with dark expressions on their faces. The inhabitants of the castle were used to pretending to be blind to all kinds of wicked deeds, but all those deeds were committed by humans against other humans.

What they couldn't forgive was a human being betraying another of their kind to the Nightmare Creatures. In the Dark City, this was tantamount to sacrilege.

Gunlaug turned his head to face the Hunters, who shivered under his gaze.

"Is this true?"

The oldest of the group, the Pathfinder, glanced darkly at Jubei and scowled.

"There must be some kind of a misunderstanding, my lord. The boy in question was a highly valued member of my party. We all had high hopes for his future. His death saddened all of us a great deal."

His voice was steady and calm. Perhaps even a little too calm.

Jubei snarled:

"Lies! I happened to be hunting on that day myself and saw everything with my own two eyes! I know what you did, bastard!"

Gunlaug turned to face the crows and sighed. After some time had passed, he solemnly said:

"What an unfortunate situation. It seems that it is your word against his, Jubei. What to do, what to do? I trust my brave men wholeheartedly, of course. Who would be so ungrateful as to distrust

these heroes when they are the ones keeping you all alive? Surely, there's no one that vile and wicked among you, my precious wards."

Sunny held his breath, feeling singled out by the insidious voice. The chilling threat hidden behind these words was not very subtle.

Gunlaug was silent for a few moments, battering the crowd with his oppressive psychic aura. Then, he turned away, letting the people breathe, and said:

"But it would be unbecoming of me to play favorites in such a grave matter. And this matter, oh, it is grave indeed. What a dilemma. How do we uphold justice, my wards?"

In the ensuing silence, Gemma, the leader of both Hunters and Pathfinders, suddenly spoke:

"My lord, if I may speak. Isn't there a law that suits this situation perfectly? It has existed for as long as humans lived in this ancient castle. I'm talking, of course, about the right of challenge."

He glanced at Jubei and smiled:

"If this brave hunter has any shadow of doubt about his accusation, he should step down. If not, he can challenge the criminal and prove it with blood. Of course, the real culprit here is… me. As the person responsible for these men, any crime they commit in their roles as Hunters is my fault."

Gemma's charismatic smile was wide and friendly.

"So how about, Jubei? Will you step down? Or do you want to challenge me?"

The hunter from the outer settlement glared at him for a while, his eyes burning with fury and contempt. Finally, he spat:

"Do you think I'm afraid of you, lapdog? Sure, why not. I challenge you!"

Chapter-145: Justice

The whole spectacle was so smoothly orchestrated that Sunny was almost tempted to believe in it. Of course, he knew better.

The only thing he didn't know was whether the bits performed by the Pathfinder and Gemma were rehearsed in advance or improvised on the fly to fulfill their lord's desire to maintain appearances while having the man who had dared to speak openly against him publicly executed.

And that was what this was, an execution. Sunny didn't believe for a second that Gunlaug was going to give the brave hunter a chance to leave the grand hall alive. No, he wanted him dead, and he wanted everyone to see him die.

…Lest they get the idea that it was possible to run their mouths against him and escape unscathed.

And yet, and yet… a tiny ember of hope still burned in Sunny's heart. From the looks of it, Jubei was an experienced hunter. A capable, seasoned warrior who faced numerous monsters and ended up on top every time. He was very strong, with enough willpower and resolve to crush rocks into dust. Perhaps a miracle would happen.

No matter how small, there was a possibility.

That's why Sunny couldn't understand why Gunlaug would be willing to risk his right-hand man's life in this farce.

…As though reading his thoughts, the Bright Lord spoke:

"A challenge? Ah, so be it. This is a sacred tradition, indeed. As long as good men are willing to put their lives on the line for the sake of righteousness, depravity can't win…"

The crowd of Sleepers exploded into whispers. Some of them were tense and somber, others filled with dark anticipation. The corner of Sunny's mouth turned downwards.

From what he could see, depravity had already won, or at least gotten the upper hand.

But Gunlaug wasn't done speaking:

"...However, it would not be suitable for you to represent the accused personally, Gemma. The Bright Castle can't afford to lose you, my friend. Jubei, would you mind if the accused chose another champion?"

The hunter from the outer settlement simply shrugged and said:

"Bring your worst, cowards."

Bright Lord turned to the Pathfinder and tilted his head. With his suddenly pale face reflected in the eerie mask of the strange golden armor, the murderer remained silent for a few moments, and then said in a quiet voice:

"I choose Harus, my lord."

Everyone suddenly grew silent. Sunny himself felt cold shivers running down his spine. Why did it have to be that creepy wicked cripple…

In the deathly silence, Jubei smirked and spat with grim satisfaction:

"Even better!"

It seemed that he had a score to settle with the silent hunchback, too.

Harus, who had looked a little bored and uncomfortable through the whole procedure, stared at the Pathfinder who had named him with no particular expression on his bony face, and then slowly walked down the steps.

The other lieutenants reacted to this unexpected turn of events differently. Gemma frowned and threw a quick glance at Gunlaug

before stepping back with a dark expression. Tessai grinned, as though expecting a good spectacle. Kido grew a little pale and took a little step sideways, trying to distance herself from the descending hunchback as much as possible.

Only Seishan remained silent and indifferent, not allowing any emotion to appear on her cold, beautiful face.

Realizing what was about to happen, Cassie squeezed Sunny's arm and whispered:

"Sunny, I want to leave."

After a short pause, he answered in a raspy voice:

"I'm sorry. We can't leave now."

Despite the fact that he didn't want to be anywhere near Gunlaug's scarecrow, he knew that leaving now would draw too much attention. They couldn't risk that in the presence of all five lieutenants, not to mention Golden Serpent himself.

What's more, his mission in the castle was to gather as much information as possible. He couldn't miss the chance to see one of the most dangerous creatures in this deceptively peaceful stronghold in action.

…And there was this dark feeling deep within his heart that one day, somehow, he and Harus were going to end up bloodied, with only one of them walking away alive from the fight. It was as though an invisible thread connected them together.

Perhaps it was a string of fate.

Meanwhile, the hunchback descended from the steps and stopped opposite Jubei in the empty space that had been cleared in the center of the grand hall. His face was still motionless and a little bored.

Sunny held his breath.

As Gunlaug sat silently on the white throne, Jubei summoned his Memories. A flexible armor made out of red scales appeared on his

body, complete with a winged helmet and a kite shield. In his hand, a curved scimitar weaved itself from the sparks of light. Its blade was as sharp as a razor.

The hunter glanced at Harus and said in a steady voice:

"Let's see what you're capable of, butcher."

The hunchback just looked at him with his glassy eyes and silently allowed his thick cloak to fall on the floor. Then, he grimaced and straightened his spine as much as he could, suddenly losing the appearance of a small and fragile cripple.

At his full height, Harus towered above most of the Sleepers in the grand hall, losing only to the giant Tessai. His monstrous, twisted shape radiated a sense of deep, bestial power. He didn't bother to summon any Memories, staring at the hunter with the same cold indifference.

Jubei scowled.

"So be it."

Full of anxiety, Sunny held his breath.

The proud hunter lunged forward, raising his shield and at the same time slashing with the scimitar. His movements were incredibly fast and nimble, his technique sharpened by years of bloody battles in the Dark City and guided by rich experience.

'Good… he's good…'

Did Jubei… really have a chance?

As Sunny's eyes widened, Harus seemed to miss the attack completely. As though forgetting that he wasn't armed, the hunchback simply raised a hand to meet the razor-sharp blade.

…And gripped it with his bare fist, stopping Jubei's strike in its tracks.

For a fraction of a second, everyone in the grand hall froze in

astonishment — except for the hunter, who immediately tried to wrestle his scimitar from the iron grip of the Gunlaug's killer. But it was of no use. It was as though the saber was stuck in stone.

It wouldn't have mattered anyway.

In the next moment, Harus moved forward with a snake-like speed and put his large hand on Jubei's shoulder. Then, with a sickening sound, he effortlessly tore the entire arm off.

Somebody screamed.

As blood spilled on the marble floor, the proud hunter stared at the stump that had suddenly replaced his dominant arm in disbelief, not yet feeling the terrible pain that would soon follow. However, it never did.

Before Jubei could even react, Harus grasped his head with both hands and snapped his neck in one brutal, violent motion. Then, he hit the hunter in the chest, shattering his ribs and sending the body flying back a dozen meters.

The broken corpse of the defiant challenger fell on the floor, rivers of blood flowing from its terrible wounds onto the pristine white stones.

From start to finish, the whole fight took no more than five seconds.

Harus looked at his hands, shook a few crimson droplets off, and then silently returned to his place beside the master of the castle, his expression still cold.

However, it wasn't bored anymore.

Instead, it was full of subtle glee.

After all, he had just helped his lord pass down judgment.

This was law, this was tradition.

This was justice.

Chapter-146: Power

Several hundred Sleepers stared at the disfigured body, horrified. Jubei's scale armor disappeared in a rain of light, leaving him dressed only in torn, bloodied rags. A surprised, dazed expression was still frozen on his face.

Awash in blood and broken, the man who had been proud and defiant just a minute ago was now nothing but a pathetic corpse. He was sprawled on the floor in a glistening crimson puddle, reminding everyone of one simple truth.

Never, ever dare to disobey Gunlaug, the Bright Lord.

Or you'll end up just the same.

Sunny was probably one of the only two people in the grand hall who wasn't looking at the corpse. Instead, he was looking at Harus.

Harus himself was staring at the wall, absolutely disinterested in the gruesome fruit of his dark labor.

'What else was I hoping for? Stupid. Hope… hope is a poison. It will only get you killed.'

Sunny knew all the facts, but only now had he finally understood how hopeless it was to even think about challenging the Golden Serpent.

Everything in the Dark City was designed to make him and his army invincible. That was how the damn hunchback had managed to defeat the experienced hunter from the outer settlement so easily, using nothing but his raw strength. He hadn't even had to show his Aspect Ability. Why was the divide in their physical prowess so vast?

That was because with every human in the Dark City possessing the

same dormant core, there were only two things that could make someone more powerful than the rest: Soul Essence and Memories.

And both were monopolized by Gunlaug.

Only he possessed the manpower and knowledge to freely hunt in the Dark City. This way, he had become the only person with a reliable source of both Soul Shards and Memories in his possession.

Whatever crumbs the independent hunters were able to acquire would inevitably end up in his hands, too, because Gunlaug also controlled the primitive economy in this cursed place. By providing food and safety in exchange for the so-called "tribute", he made sure that all the resources would flow in only one direction.

Into his hands.

With Soul Shards and a vast arsenal of Memories, he could make his army stronger, which in turn would bring him more Soul Shards and Memories, which in turn would make his army stronger… and so forth. It was a simple, perfect, and harrowing cycle that made his power more and more absolute with each revolution.

By the time Sunny, Nephis and Cassie had arrived in the Dark City, the divide between Gunlaug's forces and everyone else here was too wide to ever be bridged. Sunny had no doubt that most of the elite warriors of the Host had their cores saturated with Soul Essence to the brim.

There was a limit to how many Soul Shards a Nightmare Spell carrier could absorb before reaching the bottleneck of their rank… although few ever did. Advancing to the next rank removed that bottleneck and enhanced their bodies according to the saturation level of the core. But with no way to advance, people in the Dark City could only rely on the raw amount of Soul Essense to accumulate power.

This meant that within these ancient walls, sworn into servitude to a single man, there lived the most powerful group of Sleepers to ever exist in human history.

…And this was the man Nephis planned to kill.

With a shudder, Sunny remembered Effie's words: "...no Sleeper can defeat Gunlaug, ever. It's simply impossible."

He also remembered dozens of skulls swinging in the wind above the castle gates.

'Curse it all… what is she going to pull me into this time? I really have to persuade her to give up for once. My life might depend on it.'

But somehow, he doubted that Changing Star even knew how to give up. At least not when it came to her mysterious goal.

'Curses!'

Sunny was so consumed by these dark thoughts that he even neglected to listen to Gunlaug's farewell speech. He had the general idea of what kind of bullcrap the bastard was proselytizing anyway.

Soon, the Bright Lord had left his white throne and disappeared into the darkness behind it. The lieutenants followed, with Harus being the last one to leave. As soon as they were gone, the body of Jubei was unceremoniously dragged away, and a group of Handmaidens silently wiped the puddle of blood off the pristine marble floor.

The tables were moved back to their places, and the crowd of Sleepers was invited to return to their breakfast. As if nothing had happened.

However, Sunny had completely lost his appetite. Leading Cassie away, he glanced at the plates full of food and thought without humor:

'I guess there's a first time for everything.'

***

For the remaining two days, Sunny had done nothing but frantically gather information. Knowing that he will be leaving the castle soon, he became a little bit bolder in where to send his shadow.

He spent a lot of time spying on the Hunters and Pathfinders, learning their tactics and secrets. He observed how Guards were

trained. He learned which Artisans were important, and which were not. The only caste he tried to avoid was the Handmaidens.

He even studied various engravings and stone carvings that decorated the walls of the castle.

Finally, the week they had paid tribute for came to an end. On the dawn of the eighth day, Sunny and Cassie once again appeared in the large hall with beautiful stained glass windows and saw the gates of the castle.

Despite the fact that there was nothing outside these gates but a dirty slum, Sunny felt relieved. He couldn't wait to leave this damn place.

'Why do people even want to live here?'

As soon as he finished this thought, Sunny realized that he didn't actually know what life in the outer settlement was like. Perhaps the castle was actually a paradise in comparison.

'I doubt it… how bad can it actually be? I guess they just never lived in the outskirts.'

Shaking his head, he walked toward the gates, but then stopped when someone called his name.

Turning his head, Sunny noticed the familiar young man with a thin face and nervous eyes. Today, Harper seemed to be especially distressed. His clothes were a bit less tidy, and there were a few ugly blotches of ink on his parchment.

"Ah! Sun… Sunless and Cassia, right? Goodness, it has already been a week. Ah… where was I? Oh, yes. Are you guys here to pay tribute for the next one?"

Sunny stared at him for a few moments, then forced out a smile and pretended to be sad:

"No. We haven't been able to… you know, earn shards. So, we're leaving. Maybe we will see each other again, someday."

Harper opened his eyes wide and stuttered:

"W—what? Why would I be… oh, sorry. I'm very sorry that you couldn't stay longer. But don't despair! Lord Gunlaug is truly kind, and life is unpredictable. I'm sure you'll be able to come back soon."

Sunny gave him a curt nod and turned away.

'I hope not. Not too soon, at least.'

With that, they passed through the gates and left the Bright Castle… the promised castle they had spent so much time seeking and dreaming of.

What a disappointment it all had been.

Standing under the grey skies of the Forgotten Shore once again, Sunny and Cassie breathed in the cold fresh air and both smiled. Cassie tugged on his sleeve.

"Sunny… what do we do now?"

He looked at the pitiful slum that lay beneath them and answered without having to think for too long:

"What else? We go find Nephis."

Chapter-147: Guild Hall

Cassie smiled, but then suddenly frowned and asked:

"But, Sunny… how do we find her?"

He thought for a few seconds, then shrugged.

"I'm not sure. Follow the sounds of mayhem? This place is not that big. I'm sure we'll manage."

They descended the stairs and entered the slum, with Sunny looking around in search of the distinct tall figure. There weren't that many Sleepers in the outer settlement who possessed an armor-type Memory, so he was sure of his ability to notice Changing Star in the crowd.

Soon, they were surrounded by makeshift hovels and people that had empty, bleak eyes. Some of them stared at them with pity, realizing that the two had just been sent away from the castle, others openly gloated. Sunny paid them no attention.

Once again, he was surprised by the sharp contrast between the castle and the outer settlement. No matter how vile the underside of the ancient stronghold was, people were actually living there, walking around with mostly mundane human worries written on their faces.

Here in the slum, people were merely existing, and barely at that. In their eyes, there was a more dire need and a more consummate fear: the need to find food for the day, the fear of being devoured by some unseen monster in the night. They were all gaunt, cold, and listless.

The only time hope appeared on their faces was when their gazes accidentally fell on the Bright Castle.

'Hope will get you killed, fools. You have it better here than those poor souls in the fortress.'

All in all, it was not so different from the outskirts, with the added terror of Nightmare Creatures waiting somewhere in the shadows.

But then, there were monsters in the real world as well. They just wore human skin.

Sunny was once again reminded of how surprisingly well prepared he was for the trials of the Nightmare Spell, his lack of education not included.

Surprisingly, the was no sign of Nephis anywhere. They walked through the entire settlement before finally catching a glimpse of her.

At the very edge of the slum, perched precariously above the vertical fall from the stone platform, stood an uncharacteristically spacious dwelling. It was crudely put together out of slabs of stone that had been unceremoniously scavenged from the ruins, with many of them still bearing the intricate carvings left behind by the original inhabitants of the Dark City.

This barbarous atrocity was the closest to the road of white stone out of the entire outer settlement. Perhaps that was why it seemed to be a bit sturdier than the rest of the hovels. The lodge even had a small addition built on top of it, somewhat resembling a second storey.

Changing Star was sitting on its roof with her legs crossed, gazing at the rising sun and the cursed city below. In the pale light of dawn, her ivory skin and silver hair looked beautiful and eerie.

She had dismissed her armor and was wearing a crude tunic, with a piece of rope tied around her waist. Sensing their approach, Nephis turned her head and glanced in their direction.

Then, she stood up and jumped down, landing lightly on the stone surface of the vast platform.

Sunny grinned.

"Hey, Neph. Long time no see!"

***

Nephis led them inside the stone lodge, which had turned out to be her new residence. The interior was spartan and austere, with pieces of broken furniture lying here and there and cold winds sweeping freely through the spacious hall of the first floor.

Despite its larger size and superior craftsmanship, the lodge had been empty when she found it. No one wanted to live this close to both the edge of the platform at the threshold of the road, where the risk of being attacked by Nightmare Creatures was the highest. But Changing Star didn't mind.

Looking around, Sunny scoffed.

"Gee. This place surely needs some work."

Neph shrugged, seemingly not very concerned with her living conditions.

Well, they did spend the past two months sleeping on nothing but rocks and dirt, so in a sense, even this ramshackle mess was an enormous improvement. With some improvements, it could even become somewhat of a decent place.

Suddenly, Sunny felt a little guilty about all the comfort and warmth he had experienced in the castle. He was even fed delicious fresh food twice a day.

Speaking of food…

Cassie smiled and handed Neph a small bundle. Concerned about her friend, she had not eaten her supper the previous evening, choosing to save it for this moment.

"Here, Neph. I brought you something to eat!"

Changing Star received the bundle with a faint smile and lingered a little before saying:

"Thank you. Uh… do you guys want breakfast?"

With that, she walked over to a flimsy wooden table that stood near one of the walls and removed a piece of cloth from it. Beneath, there was a pile of juicy roasted meat.

It was sizable enough to feed ten people in the castle for a day or two.

Sunny stared at the meat blankly, then moved his eyes to stare at Nephis.

"...Where the hell did you get all this meat? We thought you would be starving here in the outer settlement!"

She touched her hair in embarrassment.

"Oh… a few nights ago, a big monster came from the road. I and a few other people managed to kill it. This is my share of the spoils."

Cassie opened her eyes wide.

"But I thought that Gunlaug's men were supposed to fight off Nightmare Creatures!"

Changing Star remained silent for a few seconds.

"They do if the castle is attacked, either from the slopes of the hill or from the sky. If the monsters come from the road, they usually don't bother to do anything."

…So that's why all the nearby hovels were empty. Who would want to live in the direct path of attacking Nightmare Creatures, especially since people who were supposed to fight them weren't going to move a finger to help?

Sunny smiled darkly.

'That's the glorious Castle Guard for you. Wait…'

He blinked, then glared at Nephis.

"If that is true, then why on Earth… uh, Dream Realm... would you choose to live in this pit, of all places?!"

She stared at him for a while, then said in a flat tone:

"It's quiet here."

Then, a small smile appeared on Neph's lips. Turning to a window, she added:

"I like it."

Chapter-148: Last Harvest

Behind the window, a striking vista of the cursed city sprawled far below. The morning sun washed the ruins in a pale light, making them look menacingly mysterious.

Nephis smiled.

"Besides… what can compete with this killer view?"

As though answering her words, a ghastly wail resounded from somewhere far away, echoing in the wind like a dying scream. Sunny trembled.

'I guess she meant it literally.'

With a sigh, he put Changing Star's strange choice of habitat at the back of his mind and approached the pile of meat.

"Let's eat first."

The three of them sat on the stone floor and ate monster meat, passing around Cassie's beautiful glass bottle between each other. It was just like the good old times, provided that those times were not actually that old, and there had certainly not been anything good about them.

Almost.

When all three of them were satiated, Nephis looked at Sunny with calm intensity. For some reason, he was reminded of the unseen waves of pressure that Gunlaug created anywhere he went.

"What have you learned in the castle?"

He sighed. This was going to be a long conversation.

Sunny started by describing the general order of things in the ancient stronghold. He told Neph about the six different castes and the complex relationships that existed between them, as well as briefly explaining how the members of each caste lived their lives. Sometimes, Cassie would add a few details of her own.

Changing Star frowned.

"Wait… did you say that there were five hundred people living in the castle?

Sunny gave her a nod.

"Yes, somewhere around that. Why?"

She thought for a bit, then said:

"That doesn't make sense. There are almost as many people here in the outer settlement, perhaps even more. That would put the human population of the Dark City at around a thousand. Most of them are fairly young, too — which would mean that each year, hundreds upon hundreds of us are sent to the Forgotten Shore, with most somehow managing to survive and reach the Bright Castle."

She paused.

"But I haven't seen a single Sleeper of our crop here in the slum. As far as I know, we three are the only ones to come to the Dark City after the recent solstice."

Sunny scratched the back of his head and said with reluctance:

"Actually, it's four. Caster is also here. He's living comfortably in the castle."

Nephis suddenly grew strangely animated.

"Caster of the Han Li clan? He is here?"

'No need to be so enthusiastic, damn it!'

Sunny tried not to grimace.

"Yeah. He had been here pretty much this entire time. Actually, Caster had told us that there were only seven Sleepers sent to the Forgotten Shore by the Spell this year. Strange, I know."

He paused for a few moments, and then added:

"Truth be told, I noticed this discrepancy as well. But there is an explanation. You see, there seems to be a pattern to how many people the Spell sends here. Fifteen years ago, when a bunch of crazy humans first laid claim to the castle, there would be just a dozen or so newcomers each year. Then a few dozen. Then a hundred.

In the past few years, it was several hundred each time."

Sunny gestured at the three of them.

"Until this year, that is, when mere seven Sleepers arrived. Since the Spell is obsessed with the number seven, some people believe that this marks the end of a fourteen-year long cycle and the first year of a new one. I think it's plausible."

Changing Star thought for a bit, then asked:

"How does Caster know the total number of new arrivals?"

That was a good question, naturally. One that Sunny had asked himself many times before finally convincing himself to go find the handsome Legacy and ask him directly.

"There's an Artisan in the castle with a weird type of revelation Ability. She can trace the general location of everyone a person had ever met. Caster paid her a bunch of soul shards to check if any of his acquaintances made it to the Forgotten Shore. She told him there were six."

Nephis was silent for a few moments, then simply said:

"Continue."

Sunny did. He briefly mentioned the main points of everything he had been able to learn, including all the vile crap he had to witness and his own thoughts on how things worked under the pristine white

surface of the magnificent fortress. Inevitably, he had to describe how ingenious and unassailable Bright Lord's hold over the Dark City was.

Cassie grew pale and quiet during his somber account. Changing Star's face grew darker and darker with each word. When he told her about the travesty of a trial that ended with Jubei's harrowing death and shared his own thoughts on how powerful the Host truly was, the corners of her mouth turned downward.

Finally, he came to the conclusion:

"...and that is why Gunlaug can never be defeated. He controls every facet of life here, both material and abstract. Food, shelter, hope, fear… everything comes under the purview of his authority, and his authority is absolute. Even power itself is his to give and take. Out here, Gunlaug might as well be considered a god."

Nephis remained silent for a long time, and then quietly said:

"He is not a god. He is just an impostor."

Sunny chuckled.

"In this hell… is there a difference?"

She glanced at him sharply and gritted her teeth.

After a few minutes spent in tense silence, Neph suddenly said:

"Still. That only explains why Gunalug can't be overthrown in a rebellion. Why didn't anyone simply kill him in his sleep? Why didn't one of his lieutenants stage a coup? After all, this is how tyrants usually end — by the hand of their most trusted ally."

Sunny smiled darkly.

"Ah, well. That is because up until now, I only told you about his power as a ruler. Which is, by all accounts, nothing short of terrifying. But his personal power?"

He shivered, then added in a hoarse voice:

"It's way, way worse."

Chapter-149: Dark Diver

Sunny was silent for a while, then sighed:

"Do you remember how Effie told us that he might as well be considered immortal? Well, she wasn't wrong. Apart from the fact that Gunlaug has probably absorbed more Soul Essence and has more experience fighting both Nightmare Creature and Awakened than anyone else on the Forgotten Shore… there's more to him than that."

Nephis frowned.

"Is his Aspect Ability uniquely powerful?"

Sunny shook his head.

"His Aspect Ability is that he is able to breathe and move with incredible speed underwater. But it is connected to what I am about to tell you."

He hesitated.

"You see, Gunlaug came to the Dark City around eight years ago. Since his Ability was of no use in the ruins, he quickly became an outcast. From what I was able to learn, things were even darker in the Castle back then. Strength decided everything, and anyone without strength wasn't even considered to be human."

Sunny shuddered. He could imagine it vividly.

This was, by far, the most cruel and bloody time in the history of the Bright Castle. Right after the last member of the original cohort to conquer the ancient stronghold had perished and before Gunlaug took control, things balanced at the edge of madness for a while.

Say what you want about the bastard, but at least he kept the

humans here from turning into animals… completely.

Sunny continued:

"But Gunlaug, he turned out to be mad even by those standards. Because he actually began to hunt in the dark sea."

Changing Star blinked.

"What?"

He nodded.

"Yes. At dusk, he would dive from the city wall into the black water to scavenge the soul shards from the monsters of the Labyrinth that were crushed by the flood, racing against the approaching horrors of the depths. And at dawn, he would dive into the retreating sea to scavenge meat from the remains of creatures that the dwellers of the depths had killed and left behind."

Nephis silently stared at him. They had met the abominable existences that hid beneath the black surface of the cursed sea twice, and each of these harrowing meetings had left scars on their souls and minds. To do so twice a day, every day… Gunlaug was indeed a madman.

But he was also somewhat of a mad genius.

Sunny took a deep breath.

"And this is how he turned from a desperate outcast into the Bright Lord. One day, Gunlaug was pulled away by a current and, once the sea disappeared, stumbled onto a mortally wounded, dying leviathan. The creature was still alive, but just barely. Knowing that the carrion eaters of the Labyrinth will soon come to feast on it, Gunlaug began cutting the meat of the creature's bones with his knife."

He paused, then said in a strangely dark voice:

"By chance, the leviathan happened to die from its terrible wounds at that exact moment. And since Gunlaug's blade was the last thing to cut it, the Spell happened to attribute the kill to him. And that kill…

that kill happened to give him a Memory. A wondrous golden armor that no human weapon can even scratch."

No one really knew a lot about the dwellers of the depths, but Sunny and Nephis had once witnessed two carapace centurions retrieve two Transcendent souls shards from the carcass of one of them. Which meant that Gunlaug's armor-type Memory was at least three ranks above the soul cores of every human on the Forgotten Shore.

Almost every weapon-type Memory they possessed was either of Dormant or Awakened rank. Even if someone managed to kill a Fallen creature and acquire an Ascended weapon from it, the weapon would most likely still be ineffective against the Transcendent armor. And since that damn armor didn't have any openings…

Basically, Gunlaug was invincible.

Sunny sighed.

"With that armor, he returned to the Dark City, gathered a few supporters, killed everyone who stood in his way, and took control of the Castle. No one was able to threaten his reign ever since. And all those who tried… well. Their skulls are out there for everyone to see, swinging on chains above the gates of the castle."

Nephis remained silent for a long time, staring at the floor. She seemed to be a bit disheartened. Finally, she asked:

"What traits does the armor possess?"

He shrugged.

"Who knows? It's not like anyone who had the opportunity to learn that lived to tell the tale. The only thing widely known about the golden armor is that it is made out of some strange liquid metal and that it emanates a field of crushing psychic pressure. But even that is not entirely true. Actually, it only affects those who look at their reflection in the visor. Cassie wasn't affected at all."

The blind girl raised an eyebrow, only now learning that everyone except for her always felt incredibly oppressed in Gunlaug's presence. For once, her terrible Flaw gave her an advantage.

It had also allowed Sunny to learn a valuable secret. But he had no time to be happy about it.

The most important part of this conversation was drawing close. He had to convince Changing Star to abandon any idea of going against Gunlaug. Otherwise, all three of them were going to end up dead.

Sunny looked at her and asked in a carefully neutral tone:

"So, what do you think?"

Changing Star was quiet for a while, then suddenly said:

"I have also learned something while you were gone."

Sunny frowned slightly. Was she trying to avoid this conversation? Feeling heavy and uncertain, he asked:

"Really? What is it?"

However, in the next second, he had forgotten all about his previous worries. Because Nephis looked him right in the eyes and said:

"There is a Gateway here, after all."

Something exploded in Sunny's mind.

'What… there is… there is a Gateway?'

Stunned, he stared at Neph with wide eyes.

How could this be? Why hadn't anyone ever mentioned it? No, it didn't make any sense. If there was a Gateway, why would people just stay in the Dark City? Why were both Effie and Caster so adamant that there was no way out?

A familiar dark feeling of unease settled in his heart.

Trying to compose himself, Sunny slowly said:

"Then why… why hasn't anyone left? Where is it?"

Nephis looked at the window, remained silent for a few moments,

and then answered in a flat tone:

"Where do you think? It's in the Crimson Spire, of course."

Chapter-150: Hunting Party

The Crimson Spire… that eerie and everpresent shadow that had haunted him all this time. The cyclopean tower that stood at the center of the Labyrinth, or maybe was the source of it, emanating a harrowing sense of foreboding.

The background for the last part of Cassie's vision.

Of course, the damn Gateway just had to be in that damn spire!

Sunny sighed.

This was unwelcomed, but not unexpected news. After all, Inspector Rock did warn them that, should they ever find themselves in a region of the Dream Realm without an established human Citadel, they should look for the Gateway either around or inside the most prominent landmark there.

The Crimson Spire loomed over the entire Forgotten Shore like an axis connecting heaven to earth. It was hard to imagine anything more prominent. Ever since Cassie had first told them about it, deep down, Sunny always suspected that they were going to end up having to enter that creepy tower at some point.

After the revelation that there was no Gateway in the human castle, that suspicion only grew stronger.

But, wait. There was something else that Instructor Rock had told them…

'Work together to defeat the Gateway guardians… wasn't these his words? So who is guarding the Crimson Spire?'

Glancing at Nephis, he asked darkly:

"So what is inside the Spire? I gather that it's not something pleasant. Otherwise, there wouldn't be a thousand Sleepers choosing to live in a city full of vicious monsters instead of going there."

Changing Star nodded. Without changing her expression, she looked away and answered:

"A Fallen Terror."

Sunny's heart skipped a bit.

A Fallen Terror — the Nightmare Creature one whole class above the dreaded tyrants, with six mighty soul cores providing it with profane power — would certainly do the trick.

"So, going there is suicide."

No amount of Sleepers could ever hope to defeat a Fallen Terror. The possibility of surviving such an encounter, let alone emerging victorious, was zero. It was even less probable than breaking through Gunlaug's indestructible armor.

Impossible.

He chuckled. What irony! To not only be trapped in this hell, but also be forced to stare at the path to freedom every day, knowing that you'll never be able to reach it. That… that was such a cruel torture. Sunny would even go as far as to say that it was a type of hell in and of itself.

No wonder the Tower of Dusk was so unpopular. Living there would simply drive some people insane.

They were really, truly stuck here forever.

Nephis sighed.

"The first ruler of the Bright Castle led a large expedition to find a way out of the Labyrinth. They all perished. The second ruler — the last member of the original cohort — tried to reach the Gateway instead. They all died, too. After that, no one tried to find a way out anymore."

The three of them remained silent for a long time, their mood grim and somber. Now that they had a chance to spend some time in the small human enclave on the Forgotten Shore and gather information, there were no more excuses to deny it. Everything that Effie had told them was true.

They were going to spend the rest of their lives here… however long that might be.

Sunny sighed, then looked at Changing Star.

"So… what's the plan?"

Nephis looked at the vista of the ruined city through the window. Sunny was sure that she had already thought a lot about their future. He just hoped that her thoughts were not too crazy.

After a while, she said:

"We will create a hunting party."

…Not too bad. Despite the fact that becoming independent hunters was going to be a long and perilous journey, it was at least achievable. They just had to be smart and careful about it.

He scratched the back of his head:

"Going into the Dark City blind will be very dangerous."

Nephis shrugged, then turned to face him:

"You are right. We will need to recruit a pathfinder."

Someone who was already experienced and could teach them the ropes… that would certainly speed things along and make the whole process safer. Good thinking.

"Do you have someone in mind?"

She gave him a nod.

"As a matter of fact, I do. We will go see her later. But first…"

Her eyes gleamed with intensity.

"...Tell me every detail of what you have learned in the castle. Every name, every Aspect. Every Ability and Flaw you've been able to glean. Every grievance people have and every agenda they're hiding. I need to know it all."

Sunny smiled.

"Sure, no problem. But be warned, this is going to take a while. I've been very busy snooping around, you know."

For the first time since receiving his Aspect, Sunny had been able to do what he had planned to do from the start — gather information without risking his hide, as a real spy should. After months of bloody battles and open confrontations, It was strangely rewarding.

Changing Star gave him a nod.

"There's no hurry."

***

Several hours later, Sunny was finishing his winding report, his voice hoarse from all the talking:

"...is actually the same Pathfinder who the hunter from the outer settlement, Jubei, accused of using another human as monster bait. A real nasty fellow. He is an incredibly formidable fighter and is good at his job, but his personal habits… well. The man is a degenerate gambler. He spends all his shards in Aiko's gambling den, then refuses to pay and hurts anyone who dares to object."

He took a breath, then added angrily:

"Some people even say that this whole challenge happened because he wanted to hunt a powerful monster and pay off a part of his gambling debt. The bastard."

Then, Sunny thought for a while, scratched his head, and said:

"Uh… I think that covers pretty much everything. Of course, there

are a lot of things I wasn't able to learn at all."

Nephis was in deep thought, digesting the mountain of information that Sunny had thrown at her. Her face was cold and distant.

Feeling that her friend wasn't going to react, Cassie patted him on the shoulder, smiled, and said:

"You've done a very good job, Sunny! This is amazing."

He blinked and looked aside, slightly embarrassed.

"Well… of course it is. That is what my Aspect is actually for, remember? The whole monster-slaying thing is nothing but an unfortunate misuse of my talents, honestly."

'Yeah… I would much prefer to stay hidden somewhere safe and let my shadow do all the work.'

The shadow slightly turned its head and threw a menacing look his way. It was not amused.

Sunny smiled, then looked at Nephis.

"So… who is the pathfinder you want to recruit? There can't be a lot of experienced hunters in the outer settlement, right? And each of them must have their hunting party already. How are we going to persuade one to join us?"

Changing Star lingered, then said in a strangely tense voice:

"Yes. Everyone who is worth something has their own party — except for one person. But persuading her won't be easy."

She sighed, then added:

"Actually, you already know her. It's Effie."

Chapter-151: Head Hunting

Some time later, they were standing in front of a makeshift cabin. Just like Changing Star's patchwork dwelling, the cabin was constructed out of mismatched stone blocks that had been scavenged from the ruins. It was reinforced with monster hides here and there and seemed to be built slightly better than the rest of the hovels in the outer settlement.

There was a large bestial skull hung above the door, its thick forehead split apart by a devastating strike of some sharp weapon.

Glancing at the skull, Nephis took a step forward and knocked on the door. However, no response followed.

Sunny sighed.

"Maybe she's not home."

Instead of an answer, Changing Star frowned and banged on the door with her fist. The first strike was somewhat gentle, but by the last, the bestial skull was on the verge of flying off the wall.

A sleepy and irritated voice sounded from the inside:

"I swear to gods, whoever you are, you'd better be a Nightmare Creature!"

A few moments later, Sunny heard the sound of footsteps approaching the door. Before it opened, though, Nephis suddenly spoke:

"Sunny, turn away."

Hearing a strange urgency in her voice, he scowled and did as she had asked.

"Your shadow, too."

'What is going on? Are we expecting trouble?'

As he was staring away from the cabin, the creaking of wood informed him that the door was flung open.

"Who the hell is… oh. It's you."

He swore he could hear Neph's teeth grinding against each other. A few seconds later, Changing Star spoke, her tone especially flat:

"...Put on a Memory, Effie. Please."

'Wait… what?'

Why would she… oh…

Oh!

When he was finally allowed to turn back, the last glimmers of ethereal light were yet to disappear from the fabric of Effie's provocatively short chiton. She wasn't wearing anything underneath, either.

"Here. Better?"

The huntress was exactly the same as the last time he had seen her — tall, strong, and brimming with vitality. Without the bronze cuirass with leather pteruges, as well as other elements of the archaic armor, even more of hew dewy olive skin could be seen.

"So, you guys are back together, huh? Judging by how clean and shiny the other two look, I'm guessing that their stay in the Castle was pleasant?"

Sunny glanced at Cassie, then said in a reserved tone:

"Not particularly. Just like you said, the ambiance there is… well… an acquired taste, I guess."

Effie grinned.

"Well said! Anyway, how can I help you?"

Changing Star motioned at the door.

"Can we come inside?"

The unruly huntress glanced back, then shrugged.

"Sure. Why not?"

Inside, the cabin was small and cozy. One of its corners was occupied by a large pile of furs that served Effie as a bed. At first glance, it didn't seem that lavish, but once it hit Sunny that each of the furs had come from the corpse of a Nightmare Creature, he quickly changed his mind.

That was probably the most extravagant thing he had ever seen.

Also… one could only imagine what went on between those furs…

'Pure thoughts, Sunny! Focus!'

There was also a fireplace, a table with a single wooden chair, and a pair of sturdy chests. The rest of the space was occupied by various curios that the huntress had scavenged from the ruins over the years. There was no particular logic to this opulent collection except for the fact that each object had once caught her fancy for this reason or that.

After the three of them were seated, Effie returned to her pile of furs, wrapped herself in one of them and asked:

"So, what's so important that you had to come and wake me up this early in the morning?"

'Early in the morning? It's already noon!'

Nephis lingered for a few moments, then said:

"You haven't hunted since the day we met. Right?"

Effie yawned, then said in a languid tone:

"Nope. I'll go back into the ruins once my food runs out. Which will be in a day or two, I think."

What… how? The amount of meat she had butchered off those monsters was enough to feed a person for a couple of months. It was all gone already? Just how much did the vigorous huntress eat?!

Changing Star nodded.

"When you do, come with us. Be our pathfinder."

'Well… she certainly doesn't beat around the bush.'

For some reason, Sunny had not expected Neph to be this direct. He had always imagined this conversation taking much longer before getting to its real purpose.

Effie stared at them, then threw her head back and laughed out loud.

"Ah, that's a good one! Do you want me to be your nanny, too?"

When her laughter died down, she shook her head and said:

"No offense, kids, but you have just arrived in the Dark City. You are as green as it gets. Best hunters out here wanted me to become a part of their party, and I refused them all. Do you know why?"

Neph nodded with a serious expression.

"Most hunting parties share the spoils of their hunts. Each hunter keeps a part to eat and sells the rest to the people in the slum. But because of your Flaw, you can't allow yourself to do the same. You need all the sustenance a hunt can provide. The more partners you have, the lesser your share will become, so… you hunt alone, and never sell the meat of your prey, just their hides."

Effie smiled.

"I see someone has been doing their homework."

Changing Star tilted her head a little and, not paying any attention to the irony in those words, continued:

"We can solve that problem by…"

However, the solitary huntress interrupted her:

"Stop. Good guess, but you are wrong. That is not why I refused all those hunters."

Nephis blinked, surprised. After a long pause, she asked, a hint of confusion in her voice:

"Then… why?"

The smile disappeared from Effie's face.

"Because they are weak. Every one of them is weak. Even the most successful of them are. And do you know why?"

Something dark gleamed in her hazel eyes.

"They are weak because Gunlaug will never allow anyone strong to exist outside of his control. So… I am not going to be your pathfinder. Sorry, princess."

Changing Star froze, obviously flustered by that answer. She opened her mouth to say something, then closed it again and awkwardly pressed her lips together.

No matter how much she had honed her social skills during their journey through the Labyrinth, this conversation still seemed to be too much for her.

In the ensuing silence, Sunny suddenly spoke, his voice calm and slightly provoking:

"He's allowing you to exist."

Effie looked at him, raised one eyebrow with a smile, and didn't say anything.

Finally, Nephis was able to compose herself:

"We might be new here, but we are not weak. Between the two of us,

Sunny and I had killed dozens upon dozens of Awakened creatures in the Labyrinth…"

The huntress interrupted her once again:

"Even if that's true, that was there. Out here in the Dark City, things are very different."

The two of them stared at each other, one with a relaxed smile on her lips, the other with stubborn flames burning in her eyes.

'Oh, I don't like this…'

Eventually, Changing Star grimaced and said:

"So, if we prove that we have strength, you might reconsider?"

Effie chuckled.

"Damn! You say it like it's easy. You do know how many people can't even step a foot into the ruins, right? If you guys survive in this hell for a few years, maybe then we can talk again."

Nephis looked at her for a while, and then smiled darkly.

"We will talk again in the evening. Then, you will change your mind."

Chapter-152: There and Back Again

Outside, the sun was already moving past its zenith. There wasn't that much time left before the sunset, so Sunny was really unsure about what Nephis could do to change Effie's mind before evening. However, judging by the determined expression on her face, Changing Star wasn't just throwing words to the wind. She had something specific in mind.

He hesitated.

"So, uh… what exactly are we going to do now?"

Neph glanced at him, white flames dancing in the depths of her cold grey eyes. Then, she turned away and said:

"Follow me."

With that, she walked forward in the direction of the castle.

'Castle? Why are we going to the castle?'

Somewhat uneasy, Sunny gently took Cassie by the arm and hurried to catch up to Nephis. When he did, she suddenly threw over her shoulder:

"Tell me about that Pathfinder again. The one who was accused of murder three days ago."

Sunny frowned, then repeated what he knew about the guy. When he was almost finished, she asked:

"What's his Aspect Ability?"

He hesitated, then said:

"He can make any weapon become incredibly sharp when it's in his hands. Sharp enough to cut stone, maybe even steel. It's a very powerful combat Ability."

Changing Star was quiet for some time, then said:

"What about his Flaw?"

Sunny shook his head.

"That I have no idea about. People are very protective of their Flaws, you know. Not everyone goes around telling everyone about their greatest vulnerability like that lunatic, Effie."

Cassie, who seemed to be very protective of him today, decided to support this claim:

"Sunny is right, Neph. We don't even know what his own Flaw is, remember?"

Sunny almost stumbled and had to try very hard to not let any emotion show on his face.

Cassie was right, of course. While Changing Star and she had shared their Flaws with him, Sunny never reciprocated the gesture… for obvious reasons.

'That is true, but… uh, can we not talk about that?!'

Nephis silently nodded and didn't comment on it further. It seemed as though her mind was on something else.

'Phew…'

Soon, they scaled the magnificent stairs and were approaching the gates of the castle. Sunny was growing increasingly nervous about Neph's intentions.

'What is her plan, exactly?!'

"Uh… Neph? What do you need us to do?"

She shrugged, then said in her usual indifferent tone:

"You don't really need to do anything. Just follow me and try to look… uh… virtuous."

'Look… virtuous? What does that suppose to mean?!'

The Guards standing watch in front of the gates blocked their path with contemptuous and suggestive looks in their eyes.

Contempt was directed toward Sunny, while the rest was directed toward the girls, of course.

"Stop! What business do you have in the Bright Castle? Want to pay the tribute?"

"Or maybe want to get paid, instead? If you know what I mean…"

Both of them laughed, making Sunny's blood boil.

Nephis looked at them with a calm expression, then said:

"I want to go inside, but I'm not going to pay tribute."

The laughter suddenly stopped. The Guards looked at them with a bit of amusement, a harsh and dangerous light finding its way into their eyes.

"Have you lost your mind, wench? Why are you here if you're not going to pay tribute? Stop wasting our time!"

Changing Star stared at them with no emotion whatsoever showing on her beautiful ivory face. Then, she said evenly:

"I'm here to invoke the Right of Challenge."

***

For a few seconds, everyone stayed silent. Sunny's heart was beating like a wild beast in his chest.

'Mad! She has gone mad!'

But no, Changing Star was not mad. Although Sunny liked to joke inwardly about how crazy Nephis was, she was anything but. In fact, her ability to remain cool-headed and rational in any situation was one of the main reasons that made her so dangerous. Which meant that there was some opportunity she saw here that he didn't.

At least he hoped that this was the case.

Meanwhile, one of the Guards frowned:

"Stop joking around, little girl. Shut your mouth and get lost if you want to live."

Neph didn't move. Instead, she said:

"I'm not joking."

The other Guard stared at her, then shook his head:

"Those slum rats have really all gone crazy, huh? I thought that this recent show would teach them a lesson, but it seems as though it did not."

He sneered.

"Listen, lass. The Right of Challenge is not a laughing matter. It's a fight to the death. No one is going to go easy on you just because you have a pretty face. Do you understand?"

Changing Star simply nodded.

The Guard waited for a while, looking at her tall figure and the crude tunic that she wore. Then, he grimaced.

"I guess we'll have some entertainment today! Ugh, such a shame. With your looks, you could have lived in the castle without ever even needing to pay the tribute."

Shaking his head, he turned around and gestured for the three of them to follow. The other Guard stayed behind, a bewildered and darkly excited expression on his face.

With the sound of the rusty chains swinging in the wind invading their ears, Sunny, Nephis and Cassie passed beneath the hanging skulls and entered the castle.

Inside, everything was exactly the same. Even Harper was still sitting behind his opulent desk, writing something on a piece of parchment. Hearing the sound of footsteps, he raised his head and threw a furtive glance in their direction.

An expression of confused surprise appeared in his eyes.

"Uh… Sunless and Cassia? What are you guys doing back here?"

Sunny felt the desire to palm his face.

When he had said to the gaunt young man that they might see each other in the future… he certainly did not mean that that future would be on the same damn day!

Not knowing about the thoughts raging in his head, Harper smiled:

"Oh! Did you guys get lucky and come into some shards? Back already to pay the tribute?"

Sunny gritted his teeth and forced out a weak smile.

"Uh, no. Not exactly…"

Chapter-153: Guiding Star

By the time the three of them were led to the grand hall of the castle, the news that there was going to be another challenge had yet to spread through the entire fortress. Because of that, there was no crowd there, just a few dozen people who had happened to walk past and heard the commotion. However, their number was growing with each minute.

Standing before the entrance to the hall, Nephis was calmly looking forward, her thoughts a mystery. She seemed to be steady and collected. Sunny, on the other hand, was very nervous.

Just what was Changing Star planning?

Glancing around to make sure that no one could eavesdrop on their conversation, he leaned to her and whispered:

"You're not really going to fight one of Gunlaug's lieutenants, are you?"

Because that would be suicide. No matter how talented and strong Neph was, she couldn't hope to win against someone like that, at least not before absorbing enough soul shards to even the odds at least a little. Those people had not gotten to where they were by pure accident, too.

They had talents of their own.

Nephis didn't turn her head and simply said:

"...The walls have ears."

Sunny gritted his teeth and was about to retort, by at that moment, the Guard that had led them inside appeared from the grand hall, threw a dark look at them, and spat:

"Come on in, fools."

Changing Star simply walked forward, leaving Sunny and Cassie no choice but to follow.

Inside the hall, a small crowd of people was staring at the entrance. When they saw Nephis, a wave of confused whispers ran through their ranks.

"Who is that?"

"Never seen her before."

"There's something strange about that girl…"

The whole situation was much less ostentatious and theatrical than that on the day of Jubei's death. Most of the lieutenants weren't even here, not to mention the Bright Lord himself. Only the leader of Hunters, Gemma, was sitting on the steps leading up to the empty white throne. On his face, there was a slightly sullen expression.

To Sunny's relief, Harus was nowhere to be seen.

When the Guard led the three of them inside, Gemma raised his head and glanced in their direction with a frown.

"Did I hear it correctly? One of you three wants to invoke the Right of Challenge?"

Nephis took a step forward, looked him right in the eyes, and answered in her usual indifferent voice:

"I do."

Her calmness was in direct contradiction with the heavy meaning behind those words. It was the polar opposite of the impassioned, scornful, furious speech of condemnation that Jubei had given in this hall three days ago. The confused frown on Gemma's face deepened.

"You do know what that means, right, little girl?"

She continued to stare at him without showing any sign of fear, then

repeated:

"I do."

The tall Hunter sighed.

"Listen… it is indeed true that anyone has the right to invoke the Right of Challenge. But throwing your life away is a really stupid thing to do. I'm sure that you had to suffer a lot to make it this far. Everyone here did, pretty much. So how about you think about it some more and reconsider?"

His voice wasn't unfriendly. In fact, it seemed sincere, as though Gunlaug's lieutenant really did not want to see her die for no reason. However, his words fell on deaf ears. Neph just tilted her head a little and said:

"No need."

Gemma sighed again, then shook his head.

"Fine, have it your way then. Who are you here to accuse?"

Sunny already had the idea. That's why he wasn't surprised to hear her next words:

"I am here to accuse the Pathfinder known as Andel."

Andel was the person whose crime had led to Jubei's challenge, and then death.

As another wave of whispers rose from the crowd, Gemma blinked. With an unhappy scowl on his face, he said:

"As I've told the last time, I am the leader of both Hunters and Pathfinders. Any crime they commit while performing their duties is my crime, so I will be the one to answer for it. Are you sure you want to challenge me, kid?"

Sunny held his breath, knowing that Neph's next words would decide their fates.

Despite the older man's heavy tone, she did not even flinch. However, she did pierce him with a cold gaze, then slowly shook her head.

"I'm not here to accuse him of murdering the young man from the outer settlement. I'm here to accuse him of theft. Andel has lost a considerable amount of soul shards while gambling, but refused to pay. That is stealing. Since it was done on his private time and not while performing any official duties, you have nothing to do with it."

Gemma stared at her, a bewildered look written clearly on his face.

Sunny was doing the same.

'Well, that was… unexpected. Kind of ingenious, actually. Who knew Neph can be so crafty?'

By shifting the accusation from a crime committed during a hunt to a misdemeanor that had nothing to do with Andel's role as a Pathfinder, she effectively prevented any of the lieutenants from fighting on his behalf. At least if they remained true to their claim of being just.

But was a seasoned Pathfinder any less of a threat than one of Gunlaug's proxies?

And would Gemma even allow a challenge like that to proceed?

As though responding to his questions, the tall Hunter raised his eyebrows and said in disbelief:

"What? A… a gambling debt? You want to... did Aiko send you?"

Nephis shook her head again.

"No. I've never even met her."

Everyone in the grand hall looked at her as though she was insane. The charismatic lieutenant was no exception. With some exasperation finding its way into his voice, he asked:

"If you don't even know the person Andel owes the shards, why are you here challenging him on her behalf?!"

Neph simply shrugged.

"Do I need to personally know the victim of the crime to punish the criminal?"

Gemma stared, clearly finding the whole situation ridiculous.

"...It's just a gambling debt. I can pay the shards myself, and we all can.."

However, Changing Star interrupted him. Her voice was still inexplicably calm and even:

"It's not about shards. It's about justice… and law. After all, the law is our only guiding star in this dark world. Without its light, there's only darkness."

Her words echoed in the grand hall and put a grim expression on Gemma's face. By repeating what Gunlaug had said here a few days prior, she left him with little choice but to satisfy the request for a challenge.

After all, going against it would be tantamount to going against the Bright Lord's will.

'How devious! Did she learn that from me?'

The Hunter looked away with regret, remained silent for some time, and then said to one of the Guards in a dark tone:

"Go and bring Andel here. Tell that bastard that after he kills this stupid girl, he and I will have a long conversation about his… life choices."

Then, he glanced at Neph and said:

"And you… say your goodbyes and prepare for battle. Oh, right. What is your name? Tell us. That way, you will at least be remembered."

Looking him right in the eyes, Nephis stayed quiet for a bit, and then answered.

Her clear voice resounded loudly in the grand hall:

"I am Changing Star of the Immortal Flame clan."

Suddenly, everything became silent.

Chapter-154: Light of the Seven

Everyone grew quiet. Even Gemma seemed to be slightly stunned by that proclamation. The only person to not react to it at all was Caster, who had entered the grand hall a bit earlier and was now standing by one of the walls, watching Nephis with a complex expression.

Her full name was shocking to hear for two entirely different, but equally earth-shattering reasons.

Firstly, she had called herself not by a human name, but by a True one. In the entire history of human civilization, only a handful of Awakened had managed to earn a True Name in their First Nightmare. Needless to say, none of them was among the thousand Sleepers currently trapped on the Forgotten Shore.

Even Gunlaug himself did not have one.

But Nephis did.

...And Sunny too, of course, but no one had to know that.

Secondly, she had announced herself to be a Legacy, and not just any Legacy at that, but one from the legendary Immortal Flame clan. A clan that had been responsible for propelling the entire human species forward not once, but twice — first by helping conquer the Second Nightmare, then the Third.

A combination of these facts was enough to set off a metaphorical explosion in the middle of the Dark City. If this was true, then she could be considered to be an almost messianic existence here on the Forgotten Shore.

Suddenly, the calmness with which she dared to challenge a fearsome Pathfinder to a battle to the death did not seem that strange.

The dazed looks in the eyes of all the Sleepers gathered in the grand hall had slowly begun to give place to a subtle, tentative, weak glow.

It was as though a tiny seed of hope was suddenly planted in the dead soil of their lightless, forlorn souls.

Either by accident or on purpose, Nephis chose that exact moment to summon her armor. Numerous sparks of light surrounded her in a whirlpool of soft radiance, and when they were gone, a striking black and white armor had appeared on her graceful body.

Everyone's eyes were immediately glued to the symbol on its breastplate. On it, seven shining stars were intricately engraved into the strange white metal.

"Th—that symbol!"

"It's Starlight Crest!"

"The crest of the Seven!"

Just like Sunny, many of the inhabitants of the Bright Castle were familiar with the symbol of the seven stars. Not only was it carved into the robe of the giant statue standing in front of the impregnable city wall, it was also often depicted in numerous stone carvings decorating the walls of the ancient fortress.

It seemed to represent the seven heroes that had once vowed to vanquish the darkness consuming this cursed land… and lead its people back into the light.

Sunny felt cold sweat running down his spine.

'What… what is she doing? Is it all a coincidence, or did Nephis plan everything? Does she not understand how these fools will react to such theatrics? If they get the wrong idea and start running their mouths about how she is some sort of a heavenly savior, Gunlaug will soon come knocking on our doors!'

What did Neph say? Just follow her lead and try to look virtuous?

Sunny stared at her back, stumped. How would he even do that?

There had never been a single drop of virtue in his entire body!

Meanwhile, Gemma had finally managed to compose himself and threw an evaluating look at Changing Star. If there had been nothing but neglect and disregard in his eyes before, now there was a hint of dark wariness in them.

Slowly, the leader of Hunters smiled.

"Ah. In that case, nice to meet you. I must say, it's a very impressive name you have there. Makes one wonder where it came from."

The implication behind these words was easy to understand. Gemma was insinuating that Nephis was lying.

It seemed as though this insinuation had removed a veil from everyone's eyes. Most people quickly lost their wistful expressions, once again looking at her either somberly or with dark anticipation. Only now, there were also hints of mocking disdain on some of their faces.

…And yet, several of them were still staring at her with expressions full of hesitant, timid faith.

Changing Star did not react to any of that in any way. She simply remained calm and indifferent.

As though she existed slightly apart from the dirt and despair of this world.

Soon, Andel the Pathfinder was led into the grand hall.

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The Pathfinder was of average height and solid build, with menacing blue eyes and a sharp jaw. His head was shaved on the sides, with the remaining hair weaved into a short braid. He appeared to be slightly older than the rest of the Sleepers gathered in the grand hall, with the exception of Gemma himself. Andel was probably around twenty-four years old.

He looked like a skilled, seasoned, and ruthless fighter. Every

Pathfinder was nothing less than an elite among elites, and he was no exception. Even those who hated Andel stared at him with fear and respect, even veneration.

Entering the hall, Andel threw a dark look at Nephis and walked forward to the base of the steps leading to the white throne. There, he stopped and bowed, showing his respect to the leader of Hunters.

"I'm here."

Gemma stared at him with an irritated, contemptuous expression, and then sighed.

"You know why I've summoned you?"

The Pathfinder smirked.

"Some wench wants to challenge me? Good. I was very sad to let Harus have all the fun last time."

Several angry whispers sounded from the crowd, but no one dared to reveal their hatred toward the arrogant murderer openly.

The corner of Gemma's mouth turned downward. He remained silent for some time, and then said in a dangerous tone:

"Fun? Did you say fun? Well, Andel, if you lacked excitement in your life, you should have just told me. How about this? After you kill that girl, I will show you what real fun is."

With that, he gestured to the Guards that the fight could begin. Andel frowned a little, but then turned around with a dark smile on his lips.

Sunny and Cassie were led to the side, where they joined the crowd of spectating Sleepers. By that point, there was a considerable amount of them gathered in the grand hall.

Everyone looked at the fearsome Pathfinder and Nephis with a mix of tension and anticipation. Some were here just to see a macabre show, waiting with excitement for blood to flow. To them, it didn't matter who lived and who died, although none believed that the girl from the outer settlement had any chance of surviving in a duel against the

experienced Pathfinder.

Others wanted to see Andel punished for his crimes. But even these people seemed to believe that Neph was doomed to die. They just hoped that she would manage to make the bastard bleed a little before she did.

Perhaps only Sunny, Cassie, and Caster knew that the result of this fight was not as predictable as everyone seemed to think.

Not wasting any time, Andel summoned his weapon and walked toward Changing Star. In his hand, a vicious, crudely forged falchion suddenly gleamed with polished luster, its edge turning sharper than that of a razor.

With a shudder, Sunny realized that not even the Starlight Legion Armor would stop such a blade.

The Pathfinder's movements were soft and deceptive, betraying years of experience in bloody battles against both Nightmare Creatures and humans. The dark smile had never left his lips, and there was bloodlust burning in his eyes. After years spent hunting monsters, he looked like a monster himself.

However, Nephis just stood there calmly and watched him approach, not even trying to summon her sword.

'What is she doing? Trying to mimic Harus?'

When the distance between them shortened to that of only several steps, everyone held their breaths. Suddenly, Andel flourished his cleaver and lunged forward with astonishing, almost inhuman speed. His push was so powerful that dust flew into the air from under the soles of his boots.

Sunny clenched his fists.

'...What is she!'

Just a fraction of a second before the magically enhanced blade cleaved her apart, Nephis suddenly sidestepped the strike and threw her arms into the air, simultaneously summoning her longsword. The

ethereal sparks of light passed through the blade of Andel's falchion, forming into silvery steel only on the other side of it.

The Pathfinder's eyes widened.

…Forever.

Without anything separating it from the enemy's flesh, the longsword that had just formed from the thin air behind the falchion bit into his neck, cleanly severing Andel's head from his shoulders.

As blood shot into the air from the Pathfinder's neck, his head rolled on the floor like a macabre ball and stopped near the steps that led to Gunlaug's white throne.

It seemed as though all oxygen was suddenly sucked out of the great hall.

In the deathly silence, Andel's body heavily fell on the white marble.

Everyone was staring at Nephis in utter disbelief — the Sleepers, the Guards, even Gemma.

Honestly, Sunny himself was a bit stunned. Of course, he had suspected that Changing Star might win the duel. But even he did not expect that she would kill an actual Pathfinder, one of the most fearsome warriors in the Bright Castle, with just one strike.

Dismissing her sword with a cold expression on her face, Nephis walked over to the marble steps, picked up the severed head by the hair, and looked up at the leader of the Hunters.

Then, with a well-practiced polite smile, she said:

"...Oh. It was nice to meet you too."

Chapter-155: First Recruits

The blood was still dripping from Andel's severed head when they left the castle. Nephis was holding it by the hair, her face as indifferent as always. It seemed as though carrying human heads was not even something worthy of changing facial expressions.

Suddenly, Sunny saw Changing Star in a new light. It was a long time since he had last been wary of her, but now, he was starting to wonder.

Just how many people had she killed in the past?

The facial expressions of everyone else, though, ranged from astonishment to horror. People who had witnessed the duel stared at Nephis as though she was some sort of an avenging angel. The others treated her like a terrifying demon.

'I wonder... how much souls essence had she absorbed with this one kill? Has to be a lot, right?'

…But those were just the inhabitants of the castle. The reactions of the people of the outer settlement were strangely reserved, but even more intense. They had never seen one of them stroll into the ancient fortress and walk away freely with a severed head of a Pathfinder in their hands. Now, all of them were watching silently, an inexorable, dark, sweltering emotion burning in their eyes.

All of it made Sunny very uncomfortable.

He wasn't sure if Nephis knew what kind of a storm her stunt had evoked in the hearts of these people. That sort of emotion was dangerous and almost impossible to control. If she didn't know, things could turn really bad really quickly.

…But it was even worse if she did, and had done it on purpose. Was

Neph really capable of such ingenious and effective manipulation? Was this her plan all along?

Sunny wasn't sure that he knew this side of Changing Star.

Come to think of it, he didn't really know that much about her at all.

Consumed by these doubts, Sunny didn't even notice that they were already in front of Effie's cabin. He glanced at the sky, only to see the sun hiding behind the ominous silhouette of the Crimson Spire.

It was evening, just like Nephis had promised.

'...Scary.'

The unruly huntress opened the door before they even knocked, a hint of irritation in her eyes.

"What's with all the commotion?! Can't a girl spend a day in…"

Noticing the three of them, she froze.

Without so much as batting an eye, Nephis simply threw Andel's head to Effie's feet and asked:

"Can we talk now?"

Looking down at the macabre present, the huntress narrowed her eyes. Her face darkened.

A few moments later, she glanced up and said in a grim voice:

"Come inside."

***

As soon as the door closed behind them, Effie asked in a furious whisper:

"What the hell have you done, princess?!"

Nephis tilted her head and slightly frowned. Then, she said with a hint of sincere confusion in her voice:

"You wanted me to prove my strength. Did you not?"

The huntress stared at her in disbelief. Misunderstanding her silence, Neph blinked, then added:

"Oh. That head belonged to…"

"I know whose head it is! Where did you get it?!"

Sunny sighed and slumped heavily on one of the sturdy chests. Then he forced out a dark smile and said:

"Oh, by the way… you might be the last human in the Dark City to learn this, but standing right in front of you is none other than Changing Star of the Immortal Flame clan, the champion of justice. She just walked into the castle, challenged the bastard, and killed him with one strike of her sword, right under everyone's eyes. By now, this must be the only thing people are talking about."

His tone lacked any kind of amusement. If anything, it seemed as though Sunny was just barely stopping himself from cursing out loud.

Why… why did trouble have to follow him everywhere he went?

While Neph and Cassie were anxiously waiting for Effie's response, Sunny just stared at his shadow, hoping to find some sympathy. Sadly, there wasn't any to be found. The shadow was just staring back at him, full of jubilant gloating.

Effie, meanwhile, blinked a couple of times and looked at them with a strange expression.

'That's right. Run while you can…'

Then, she threw her head back and laughed out loud.

"Oh! Oh, gods! Did you really?! This is priceless! I wish I'd seen their faces!"

Sunny watched her with his mouth wide open. That was not the reaction he had been expecting.

'Crazy, they're all crazy! I'm surrounded by crazy people!'

When Effie finished laughing, she glanced at Changing Star with a dark, but gleeful expression.

"Alright, you have proven your point. But there's something you should know. Back when I refused to join the Host, Gunlaug made it clear that if he can't have me, no one else will. Ever since, any group that dared to invite me to join them ended up regretting their decision. By hiring me as a guide, you will be putting yourself in his crosshairs. Are you sure you want to do this?"

So there was more to her story... no wonder she was so solitary.

In the ensuing silence, Sunny was the first one to speak. His voice sounded bitter and dejected:

"I mean… it's a bit late to worry about that. Don't you think?"

***

The next morning, they were preparing to go on a hunt. A small crowd of slum dwellers gathered around to see them off, their dark eyes burning with a strange mix of hope and anguish.

By now, the story of Changing Star's clever ruse and heroic battle against villainous Pathfinder Andel had already flown all over the place, growing more and more unbelievable with each retelling. Now, these people came to witness her with their own eyes.

They were especially interested in the Starlight Legion Armor and the symbol engraved on its breastplate. Who knew that the Memory of a simple carapace centurion would have such an effect on the inhabitants of the Dark City?

Sunny was not happy about it at all.

The previous evening, he had a chance to ask Nephis a few questions after they had returned to their lodge. However, he kept most of them to himself, not knowing how to properly express his feelings. In the end, he only asked about how she had managed to defeat her human opponent, who was much more powerful in terms of physical

prowess, so easily.

Changing Star's answer was very simple. She just shrugged and said:

"An old Legacy trick."

Which pretty much explained everything and nothing at all.

And now, they were going into the Dark City to hunt monsters.

When the four of them were ready to set off, a sudden hum of voices made them turn around. The slum dwellers stepped aside, letting a tall young man walk through.

Sunny frowned.

'Great. What is he doing here?'

Walking closer, Caster stopped a few meters away from them and gave a polite bow.

"Lady Nephis, Huntress Athena, Cassia, Sunny. Good morning to all of you. I, Caster of the Han Li clan, would like to join your hunting party. Will you have me?"

Everyone grew quiet for a few moments. Despite Sunny's dislike of the handsome Legacy, having him on their side would be an incredible boon. Genius fighters like Caster were hard to come by anywhere, let alone on the Forgotten Shore. He felt torn.

A buzz of whispers rose from the crowd. People were shocked to see a warrior from the castle volunteering to join an outer settlement cohort. And one of such fearsome reputation, too!

After some time had passed, Changing Star simply shrugged.

"If you want."

Just like that, the proud scion of the Han Li clan had become the fifth member of their hunting party. It was strange to see their numbers grow after months spent alone in the Labyrinth, but that was probably inevitable.

What else did Sunny expect? That it would be just the three of them forever?

'Stupid...'

Together, the five Sleepers left the slum of the outer settlement behind and stepped on the road of white stone that lead into the cursed ruins.

…And just like that, the fates of every human in the Dark City were sealed.

The end had begun.

Chapter-156: Free Lunch

Their first hunt was surprisingly uneventful.

Guided by an experienced pathfinder and augmented by Sunny's stealthy shadow, they managed to avoid any Fallen creatures and arrive at the destination in one piece. There, the group hid in the ruins and waited for their prey to show up.

The plan of battle was discussed beforehand. After Effie had described the type of monster they were here to kill, complete with a detailed list of its strengths and weaknesses, Nephis quickly assigned different roles to different people.

Sunny had expected that things would work just like back in the Labyrinth, but to his surprise, they did not. Just like before, Neph was going to take most of the risk and lure the enemy into revealing its vulnerability. However, Caster was going to be the one to make use of it and deal the fatal blow, not Sunny.

Which made sense, really. After all, his Ability was not a combat one, at least not officially. It was rational to entrust the role to someone with an incredibly powerful combat Ability, as the one Caster possessed.

Still, for some reason, Sunny felt angry about it. It felt as though he was being replaced.

Not wishing to appear childish, he swallowed his bitterness and remained silent.

When the monster did show up, everything went perfectly. Nephis and Caster were able to finish the creature off without sustaining any injuries. Their teamwork, while not effortless, was strangely harmonious, probably because both were Legacies and had received similar kind of training. Sunny, whose task was to join the fray if

things went wrong, ended up not having to lift a finger.

Neither did Effie, who simply stayed with Cassie in case the blind girl needed protection. After everything was over, she laughed:

"Ha, this is the easiest meal I've ever earned!"

Effie's status in the party was a bit strange. Unlike the rest of them, she had not shown any desire to join the cohort officially. Instead, she was somewhat of a hired worker — her responsibilities included guiding the party through the ruins and providing them with information, and nothing else. She wasn't even required to fight side by side with them.

After the Nightmare Creature was dead, they quickly butchered it and left the scene of the battle loaded with a heavy weight of meat. Before the shadow of the Crimson Spire fell on the Dark City, the cohort was already approaching the marble arch at the base of the hill.

This was when something unexpected finally happened. And it happened because of Nephis.

After giving a fair share of the spoils to the vigorous huntress, she glanced at Sunny, Cassie, and Caster. Then, Changing Star said:

"I would like for you three to entrust me with your part of the meat."

'What? What is that about?'

Before Sunny had an opportunity to ask a question, Cassie already smiled and said:

"Of course, Neph!"

Caster did not linger, either. With a small bow, he nodded.

"As you wish, lady Nephis."

Sunny gritted his teeth. After that, he would have looked like a complete jerk if he were to start interrogating her. Especially because, technically, he had not done anything except for lending his

shadow to Effie. Nephis and Caster were the ones who had actually risked their lives.

"...Fine."

Nephis gave them a nod and continued walking up the white road.

When they returned to the outer settlement, she separated the remaining share of monster meat into two parts. One, much smaller part, she handed to Cassie. The other, incomparably larger part, she simply placed on the white stones in front of their lodge.

Effie looked at the whole process with curiosity. So did the slum dwellers who had gathered to welcome them back.

Sunny frowned:

"What are you doing?"

Changing Star glanced at him and then gestured to the small bundle of meat in Cassie's hands.

"This is for us to sustain ourselves. We will eat that meat until our next hunt."

Somebody from the crowd shouted:

"What about the rest? Are you selling it? What is your price?"

It was customary for the outer settlement hunters to sell some of their spoils. That was how people here fed themselves. The meat could be exchanged for items, services, or, in very rare cases, actual shards.

Neph turned to the people who had gathered around and looked at them with a frown. When everyone grew quiet, she said in a cold tone:

"My hunting party will not be selling any meat. Ever."

Before anyone had time to react, dismayed by that answer, she took a step to the side, gestured to the large pile of meat, and said:

"...Instead, we will be giving it away for free."

***

A dead silence hung above the edge of the outer settlement. The slum dwellers who had come to catch a glimpse of Changing Star or in hope of procuring some food were all looking at Nephis with a dark mix of mistrust, disbelief, and suspicion.

After a while, someone shouted:

"What trick are you trying to play? People here are hungry, Changing Star! Shame on you!"

Nephis crossed her arm, furrowed her brow, and answered:

"There is no trick. Everyone is free to take a small share of the meat to fill their stomach."

The young man who had accused her before laughed.

"Why would you just hand it out for free? Do you think that we're fools?"

Sunny was being tormented by the same question. He often joked about Neph's foolish nobility, but he also knew that she wasn't really stupid. She always had a reason for everything she did, even if those reasons sometimes seemed insane to him.

Lately, he even started to suspect that Neph was much more cynical and pragmatic than he had ever given her credit for. It's just that her version of cynicism was very different from his own.

What was she doing?

Meanwhile, Nephis pierced the shouter with a cold look, scowled, and said, a hint of anger in her voice:

"...Why? Am I not a human? Are you not humans? Does a human need a reason to help others of her kind in this cursed place?!"

She took a step forward and looked at the gathered people, making

them shiver under her heavy gaze.

"Shame on me? No. Shame on you all for forgetting who you are. We are people, not beasts. In the real world or in the Dream Realm, this is who we are."

Her words echoed above the white stones, mixing with the howling wind.

"Now come forward and take some food if you're hungry!"

The slum dwellers were still not convinced. However, their hunger was stronger than their wariness. Soon, the first of them stepped forward, tentatively took a small strip of meat, threw a furtive glance at Nephis, and then hurriedly walked away.

When the others saw that nothing happened to him, they became braver. Young men and women dressed in rags formed a messy line. One by one, they came forward, received their tiny piece of meat, and then disappeared with haste, afraid that it will be taken back.

Slowly, a new kind of light appeared on their faces. It was the same timid, weak emotion that Sunny had noticed in the eyes of the castle inhabitants after Neph had announced her name.

It was something that precipitated hope, or maybe faith.

With a dark expression on his face, Sunny looked up, at the tiny silhouettes of Guards observing them from the walls of the magnificent fortress.

Nephis was right when she said that they were all still people. However, she was wrong about everything else.

Because people were much worse than beasts.

...He did not like what was happening at all.

Chapter-157: Wind of Change

After that day, things moved with a speed that left Sunny disoriented. It was as though he was being pulled forward by an overpowering current, helpless to slow down or change direction. Before he could react to one change, another would happen, making him feel like he was losing control. Everything was happening so fast that he found it difficult to adjust.

It was hard not to fear that, eventually, he would simply be left behind.

After that first hunt where Nephis had chosen to give most of the spoils away, she led them on several more. Not all of those hunts went as smoothly, but they did manage to return victorious, if a little battered. Every time, she paid Effie her share of the meat, took a small amount for them to consume, and gave the rest to the people of the outer settlement free of charge.

Because of how little their own share was, the group was forced to hunt every other day instead of once or twice a month. Sunny did not understand at all why they were taking on all that unnecessary risk.

Provided, he wasn't exposed to many risks himself. Apart from a couple of short battles where Neph and Caster ended up requiring some backup, he spent most of his time with Effie, serving as her scout and slowly learning the ins and outs of the Dark City from her.

With the well of knowledge that the unruly huntress possessed and his nimble shadow, the party rarely met anything they weren't ready to face. This gave them an incredible advantage over all other hunting parties of the outer settlement, and even some of Gunlaug's own.

Soon, their flawless and intense track record earned the cohort reputation and renown. They weren't seen as newcomers anymore.

Instead, people considered them to be nothing short of the strongest hunters in the slum. Many even believed that Changing Star and her people were in no way inferior to the Hunters of the Bright Castle.

Nephis herself was known to be a fearsome fighter ever since her dramatic duel with Andel. Effie had the reputation as one of the outer settlement's best from a long time ago. Handsome and capable Caster quickly won respect and adoration thanks to his amiable personality, noble bearing, and skill.

The three of them were considered to be the core of the party, with Cassie and Sunny existing somewhere on the periphery. People loved Cassie because Neph had entrusted her with the responsibility of handing out the free meat… and also because it was nearly impossible not to love this sweet, exquisitely beautiful, and tragic girl.

For most of the slum dwellers, she was the welcoming face of the cohort.

Sunny, on the other hand… no one really paid him any attention. With no valiant feats of vanquishing monsters of the Dark City under his belt, most considered him to be a mere support member of the party. Inconsequential at best… a charity case at worst.

If they even remembered his existence.

Sunny was simultaneously happy to live in obscurity and secretly infuriated by this lack of recognition. It was good that no one suspected how powerful he really was. And yet… watching everyone fall over themselves in Caster's presence while completely ignoring his own made Sunny want to kill something. Or someone.

Especially because, due to the tactical composition of the cohort, Nephis spent most of her time with the handsome Legacy. They seemed to work especially well together.

When this frustration threatened to overwhelm Sunny, he would go away, find a quiet corner, and train his katas until every muscle in his body hurt. Usually, the whistle of the Midnight Shard's blade cutting air was enough to calm him. He trained his swordsmanship

day after day, finding strange comfort in it. At least this was something he could control.

…Of course, Sunny was never entirely relaxed. In fact, with each day, he grew more and more anxious.

Because other things were changing as well.

After each hunt, Changing Star would provide the dwellers of the slum with free food. At first, they treated her with distrust, then with gratitude, and finally with something akin to reverence. The strange light that Sunny had noticed in their eyes after that first time was slowly growing brighter and brighter.

Some people even started jokingly calling her "Saint Nephis", as though she was some sort of an angel. However, he felt that these words strangely contained less and less humor with each day.

It was really very creepy, not to mention dangerous. The more people looked at Neph like she was their personal savior, the more he feared how drastic Gunlaug's reaction would be. If history had shown anything, it was that kings never went easy on meddling messiahs.

And throughout all of that, the same question continued to torment Sunny.

Was all of this an accident, or had Nephis done it on purpose?

As time went by, more and more random people joined their group. They weren't hunters, just forlorn young men and women from the outer settlement who wanted to help. They tended to monster hides that the cohort brought back from the hunts, maintained various tools and gear that needed to be used, assisted Cassie with handing out food, and did other kinds of small but useful things.

Soon, the ramshackle lodge was full of them. Sunny didn't even know all of their names. It seemed as though every day, someone new would appear, acting as if they had always been a part of the group. What's worse, not all of them seemed to know who he was, either. No once and not twice, someone would smile at him and ask in a friendly tone:

"Are you new?"

…Of course, bastards never said the same thing to Caster.

Sunny felt like he was slowly becoming a stranger in his own home. The feeling was rather unpleasant, not to mention how perfectly it fit all his insecurities.

What's worse, these new people really made him uncomfortable. He wasn't really sure of whether they were Changing Star's helpers, or if they were her followers.

Were they loyal, or… devout?

…One night after a couple of weeks of this, he was suddenly woken by Cassie tugging on his sleeve. The blind girl was whispering:

"Sunny! Wake up!"

A moment later, he was already on his feet, ready to summon the Midnight Shard. A light coming from the other room told him that Neph was awake, too.

'Gunlaug? Did someone betray us?'

"What's wrong?"

Cassie covered the candle she was holding in her hand and answered in a worried voice:

"Something… something is coming from the road. I've dreamt of it."

'A Nightmare Creature…'

Knowing what had to be done, Sunny simply nodded, gripped her shoulder for reassurance, and walked over to meet Nephis.

Since their lodge was on the edge of the slum, right in front of the entrance of the ancient road, they had no choice but to fight.

That night, the three of them — Changing Star, Sunny, and Caster — battled a devil that had wandered up the hill and fought it off before

it could reach the outer settlement.

When dawn came, terrified people walked out of their hovels on shaking legs and saw the horrible marks left on the white stones by the beast's claws, as well as puddles of blood, both human and that of a monster, steaming in the morning cold.

They also saw Changing Star leaning tiredly on her silver sword.

Sunny, who was sitting with his back against the wall of the lodge and breathing heavily, was looking at her, too.

…Back when he was describing to Nephis why Gunlaug could never be defeated, he had told her that every facet of life here was under his control: food, safety, hope, fear, even power itself.

Now, Changing Star had given these people food. By protecting the outer settlement, she had given them safety. She had even given them hope.

There was also the fear that the inhabitants of the castle felt after Neph had easily beheaded one of their Pathfinders.

All that remained was power.

Finally, the question that pressed heavily on his mind had an answer.

No, none of this was a coincidence. Everything that had happened, from choosing the outermost building in the slum as their base to insisting on giving away the food for free, was part of Changing Star's strange but methodical plan. She knew what she was doing all along.

But why was she doing all this? What was her ultimate goal?

Uneasy, Sunny stared at Nephis and wondered about the future.

Chapter-158: Invisible

After about a month of living in the outer settlement, Sunny woke up one morning with the feeling of not belonging anywhere in this world. This familiar feeling had pursued him for most of his life, and had returned recently after being gone for some time.

With a sigh, he rose from his narrow cot and summoned the Puppeteer's Shroud. The stone lodge was already full of sounds and voices. The tempting smell of breakfast filled the air.

Coming out of his small room, Sunny saw a bunch of Neph's helpers rushing here and there, busy with various tasks. Some of them stopped to greet him, others did not. He paid no attention to them and went outside to wash his face and take a look at the sky.

The grey sky of the Forgotten Shore looked as it always did. Nothing ever really changed in this loathsome hell.

On his way back, Sunny noticed a gaunt figure standing hesitantly near the doors of the lodge. The ragged young man looked very familiar.

Reaching into his memory, Sunny identified him as the friendly, but nervous receptions from the castle. His clothes were much less clean and tidy than they had been before, and his face had become even thinner.

The young man had clearly seen better days.

'What is he doing there?'

Coming closer, Sunny called out to the young man:

"Uh… Harper, right? How come you're here?"

Harper flinched, then looked at him with anxious eyes:

"Oh… Sunless! It's, uh… it's so nice to see you."

Sunny stared at him for a while, then asked bluntly:

"Did they kick you out of the castle?"

Harper's face instantly fell. Lowering his gaze, he stayed silent for a few moments, and then said quietly:

"I haven't been able to pay the tribute anymore. So… yes. I guess they did."

Then he glanced up, hesitated, and asked in a weak voice:

"I… I heard that I can get some food here?"

Sunny tried to give him a reassuring smile.

"Sure. Usually, we give out meat after the hunts. But if you're hungry right now, I'm certain there's something we can do. Just talk to… uh… a girl with red hair. She's in charge of breakfast, I think."

Harper smiled, too, the weak light of hope igniting in his eyes.

"Really? They will just give me a meal for free?"

Sunny shrugged.

"Why not? We have enough food right now. Most of those guys and girls are always here, anyway. They're like guests that won't le… uh, doesn't matter. They help around, doing this and that, to express their gratitude, I guess. If you feel guilty just eating for free, ask them for some chore.

This might not be the Bright Castle, but you'll see that life here can be not bad as well."

Guiding the gaunt young man inside, Sunny directed him toward the kitchen and sighed.

Even castle dwellers were now coming to their lodge. If this went on,

he would have to share his room with some random stranger. What a joke.

Entering the main hall, he noticed Nephis and Caster standing near the window, discussing the approaching hunt. This morning, there were several hunters from other parties surrounding them. The cohort had been planning a big joint hunt for a while now, and today was the day.

'Did they just... start without me?'

Hiding his discontent, Sunny walked over to the group of hunters and greeted them. Caster smiled at him, while Nephis simply nodded. The other hunters glanced at the new arrival and didn't pay him much attention.

'Fools. If you knew who stands before you…'

Consoling himself with these childish thoughts, Sunny listened to the discussion. One of the hunters was speaking:

"...South of the collapsed lighthouse is a good choice, but the Awakened creatures living there have an incredibly sharp hearing. Attacking them in large numbers won't be easy."

In the past month, their lodge had gone through a transformation. The remnants of broken furniture were long gone and replaced. Some of the new pieces of furniture came from the ruins, some were made right here by the craftsmen of the outer settlement. There were monster hides and decorations hung on the walls, making the space look neat and presentable.

These days, the lodge appeared as the headquarters of a small, but prosperous Awakened cohort. There was even a large map of the Dark City on one of the walls, with various symbols marking all kinds of useful information.

Currently, the hunter was pointing at a particular spot on the map:

"This spot right here is much more promising. Blood Fiends are known to dwell in these parts. They hibernate during the day, so if we manage to find a lair or two…"

Caster shook his head.

"The area you're suggesting is too close to the territory of those strange living statues. We all know how formidable those bizarre creatures are. I still think that south of the lighthouse is better. We just need to think of a way to deceive the hearing of the monsters…"

Suddenly finding something that he could be helpful with, Sunny said:

"Uh, I have a bell that can…"

However, his voice drowned in the buzz of the conversation. No one paid attention to his words.

Embarrassed, Sunny inhaled deeply, waited for a few seconds, and spoke again:

"Actually, we can use one of my two sound-producing Memories to…"

But right at that moment, Caster seemed to come up with a brilliant idea. Everyone listened to him, turning their backs to Sunny. It was as though he was completely invisible.

'What… what's even the damn point?'

Sunny stood there for a minute or two, feeling awkward, angry, and utterly stupid. Then he simply turned around and walked away.

Finding his way to the roof of the lodge, he climbed on top of the second-storey addition and sat there, solemnly watching as the sun slowly climbed up. After a while, Sunny sighed and closed his eyes, letting the shadow slip back into the building.

Just as he had expected, no one even noticed his absence. Not surprised, he sent the shadow around the lodge, watching all the people who were busy making Neph's mysterious plans happen.

Everyone seemed full of energy, enthusiasm, and a sense of belonging.

Why was he the only one who couldn't fit in?

Even that guy from the castle, Harper, had already found some friends. He was currently helping the red-haired girl who was in charge of breakfast wash the dishes.

Sunny frowned.

Something… something wasn't quite right with Harper. He couldn't put his finger on it, but the gaunt young man seemed a little off, somehow.

Forgetting all about his bad mood, Sunny concentrated on watching the timid Sleeper. Harper seemed to do just what any newcomer would do: helping people, learning their names, and asking questions about how things worked in the Changing Star's party. It seemed as though he wanted very badly to stay in the lodge and become useful. Which was understandable.

But something was wrong.

Sunny's suspicions were confirmed when, about an hour later, Harper left the lodge and went back into the slum. With the shadow stealthily following him from behind, the gaunt young man made sure that no one saw him and hurriedly dove into a secluded alley. Deep in the darkness of that alley, a man was waiting for him.

Sunny frowned, recognizing one of the high-ranking Guards from the castle.

'So that's what all this is about.'

The Guard, meanwhile, glared at Harper and asked in a rough, unfriendly tone:

"Well?"

Harper looked down, his fear and anxiousness apparent.

"Yes! Yes, uh, sir. I've done what you told me. It wasn't very hard."

The Guard smiled.

"Good. It seems that you really do want to return to the castle."

Harper glanced up, a desperate light igniting in his eyes.

"Really? So… I can return? Even though I don't have any shards to pay the tribute?"

The smile disappeared from the Guard's face.

"You will be able to return after you gather all the information that I told you to learn. If you do, I'll invite you inside myself. No need to even worry about the tribute. But! Remember: I need to know everything about the core members of the cohort, including Saint Nephis herself. Their Aspects, their Abilities, their Flaws.

I even want to know what hand they use to wipe. Understand?"

Harper paled.

"But, sir… things like that… it won't be easy to learn them! Especially for, for a simple servant like me."

The Guard frowned.

"Didn't you say that you knew two of the cohort members already? This is why I gave you this chance to begin with. Did you lie to me, boy?"

The gaunt young man flinched.

"No! No, I do know them. I actually spoke with Lady Changing Star's scout already. He… he is a friend of mine."

A wide, menacing smile appeared on the Guard's face.

"Then what's the problem? Just get that fool talking. Rats like him will tell you everything as long as you pay them a little attention, believe me. I'm willing to bet that this useless freeloader is walking around full of jealousy and delusions of grandeur. Pretend to respect him even a little, and he won't be able to shut up."

'Ouch.'

Harper nodded, then suddenly hesitated. After a few moments of

silence, he asked in a timid voice:

"Sir… you won't hurt them, will you? They are… they are good people."

The Guard stared at him for a second or two, then said in a dark, mocking tone:

"Why do you ask if you already know the answer?"

Hearing those words, Harper deflated. His face darkened, and he lowered his head, as though ashamed to look straight.

...However, he didn't object.

'That bastard! Just wait and see…'

Sunny was already planning the beating he was going to give the cowardly young man before throwing him out of the lodge, but at that moment, a voice called out for him.

It was Effie.

"Hey, doofus! Are you asleep? Come down, the hunt is starting!"

Torn away from the shadow's perspective, Sunny threw a dark glance at the tall huntress, called his shadow back, and sighed.

'I'll deal with him after we return.'

…But by the time he returned, Sunny was in no state to deal with anything.

Chapter-159: Revelation

Despite all his misgivings and unease, Sunny had never expected that this hunt was going to change everything. He was just going through the motions, somewhat on edge because of the scale of this joint operation, but also strangely reassured by the large number of hunters surrounding him.

The unusual hunting party left the outer settlement at noon, heading east, to the massive ruin of a collapsed lighthouse that was situated at the edge of the city. There were almost twenty of them gathered together, all carefully making their way through the deadly maze of narrow streets, with Effie serving as the chief pathfinder and Sunny helping her by scouting ahead.

The plan was as straightforward and simple as possible. However, nothing was really ever safe in the Dark City. Everyone was prepared for the worst.

And pretty soon, their fears came true.

Halfway to their destination, a sudden sound made Effie freeze in place. Raising a fist to signal everyone to stop, she peered into the fog, a dark and foreboding expression on her face. Feeling that something bad was about to happen, Sunny commanded his shadow to return and moved closer to Cassie. His hand was ready to grasp the hilt of the Midnight Shard out of the air.

For a few moments, everything was quiet. Then, Effie's pupils suddenly widened.

"Scatter!"

As soon as the word left her mouth, the experienced hunters dashed in different directions. Sunny himself grabbed Cassie and lunged to the side, dragging her along with him.

Then, something large and heavy crashed from above into the cobblestones where the Sleepers had been standing just a second ago. Luckily, most of them were already somewhere else due to Effie's timely warning.

However, a couple of people were a little late to react. Their screams drowned in the sickening sound of tearing flesh.

Sunny cursed.

His shadow was nowhere near yet, leaving him with no choice but to fight without its aid. He spun around, summoning the Midnight Shard… and froze for a fraction of a second, all blood draining from his face.

Out there in the middle of the street, a massive, winged creature was standing on the cracked cobblestones, its pale body and black feathers stained by the blood of the unfortunate hunters. Its terrifying beak was open, revealing rows of sharp, needle-like fangs.

A Spire Messenger!

As Sunny watched, momentarily paralyzed by fear, a long red tongue snaked out of the creature's maw to lick the blood off its face.

'Move!'

Shaking off the paralysis, Sunny gripped his sword and prepared to fight for his life.

…His and Cassie's.

After that, everything happened incredibly fast, but also felt like an eternity. The hunters had a simple choice to make: either separate into smaller groups and retreat into the ruins, risking encountering something equally as or even more terrifying, or stand their ground and try to drive the Fallen Beast away. Without having to discuss it, everyone chose the second option.

No matter how dangerous, a familiar enemy was always better than the unknown.

'Unknown…'

The surviving hunters attacked the abomination with all they had. Even though their Memories had no chance of breaking through the skin of the terrible creature, each strike still hurt it. Those who had Aspect Abilities capable of dealing direct damage immediately used them, hoping to at least disorient the beast.

Of course, no Ability of a Sleeper could ever hope to wound a Fallen Beast. However, if their assault was ferocious enough, the Messenger could retreat to search for easier prey.

If it only made the abomination angrier, however, most of them were going to die. More than anything, trying to resist creatures of this rank was nothing but a gamble.

For several seconds, it wasn't clear which way the situation would turn. The Messenger easily shrugged off the rain of attacks and lashed out with its beak, piercing one of the hunters clean through despite the man's mighty build and heavy armor. Another was almost torn apart by terrifying talons, but at the last second, Caster managed to pull the young man away thanks to his incredible speed.

Sunny waited at the back, covering Cassie and praying that his shadow would come back in time to give him a chance of dealing damage to the damned creature.

…But in the end, it was Effie who dealt the decisive blow.

Summoning her weapon, she leaped forward. Sunny could see her lean, powerful muscles moving like wire ropes under the olive skin. As though turning into a spring, her whole body tensed, and then exploded with momentum. There was enough force behind her attack to split a mountain apart.

Miraculously, the tip of her weapon managed to break the pale hide on the Messenger's chest and stab deep, causing a stream of blood to shoot out. The creature screamed, and then lashed out with its powerful paws at the huntress.

A large round shield appeared on Effie's left hand. Digging the soles

of her sandals into the ground, she leaned forward and received the terrifying blow. The cobblestones under her feet cracked, but the huntress remained standing.

Spitting a mouthful of blood, she grinned crazily and twisted her weapon, causing more damage and pain to the Messenger.

It seemed as if the Fallen Beast did not expect to meet such fierce resistance from a bunch of ants, not to mention actually being hurt by them. Letting out another scream, it waved its wings to send the Sleepers flying back, picked up the dead hunters, and jumped into the air.

Soon, the abomination turned into a dark spot in the skies. All that remained behind were puddles of blood, broken stones, and the moans of battered humans.

Somehow, they had survived… well, most of them.

Effie straightened, dismissed her shield, and glanced down.

"Damn. I think my arm is broken!"

With blood running down her chin, the huntress laughed and leaned on her weapon, visibly exhausted.

Sunny wanted to congratulate her on that awesome strike, but then, something registered in his mind.

Suddenly cold, he stared at Effie's weapon. He had never seen her fight before, so this was the first time Sunny saw what Memory the huntress used in battle.

It was a spear. An ancient, beautiful spear forged from bronze.

Something clicked in his mind, disparate pieces of information connecting together.

And then, everything exploded.

… Or at least it felt that way.

Because Sunny finally understood the future.

Chapter-160: The Future

"Hey, doofus. You're okay?"

Sunny reacted after a second or two, raising his head and staring at Effie with empty eyes.

"...Y—yeah. I'm fine. Just… thinking about stuff."

Effie gave him a strange look, then shrugged and turned away. Everyone was too busy to pay him any attention. Not that anyone ever did.

Left alone, Sunny staggered and slowly lowered himself to the ground. In his mind, one phrase was repeating itself, over and over, growing louder and louder with each second.

"A woman with a bronze spear drowning in a tide of monster… a woman with a bronze spear..."

This was a part of the vision that Cassie had seen back at the beginning of their journey, on the night they had spent atop the giant statue of a headless knight.

The one that was so harrowing that she had almost jumped into the dark waters of the cursed sea just to run away from her terror.

It was also the key that connected every little piece of information that Sunny knew into one cohesive picture and let him understand the true meaning of that terrifying vision.

He shuddered, remembering what Cassie had told them on that dark night in stark detail:

'I saw the human castle again. Only this time, it was at night. There was a lonely star burning in the black skies, and under its light, the

castle was suddenly consumed by fire, with rivers of blood flowing down its halls. I saw a corpse in a golden armor sitting on a throne; a woman with a bronze spear drowning in a tide of monsters; an archer trying to pierce the falling sky with his arrows…'

All that time, Sunny was sure, for some reason, that Cassie saw the cataclysm that had devoured this land and turned it into a desolate hell, creating the Forgotten Shore. The first part of the vision was certainly referring to how the curse of the all-consuming darkness had broken free from its seven seals. So he had just assumed that the other parts of the vision spoke about the past, too.

But Effie's spear gave him an epiphany, a terrible revelation that he had been wrong all this time. That the apocalyptic images Cassie had described were not of the past, but of the future.

Their future.

Trembling, Sunny raised his head and glanced at Nephis, who was using her powers to heal the wounded hunters, her ivory face contorted in a painful grimace. His eyes were wide and full of disbelief.

It was all so clear!

She… she was the lonely star that burned in the dark skies above the Bright Castle, bringing with it fire and rivers of blood. After all, her name was Changing Star.

Or, depending on the runes used to write it, Star of Misfortune.

The Star of Ruin.

Sunny spent so much time fearing what Gunlaug was going to do with Nephis, but he should have been scared of what she was going to do to him, instead. A corpse in a golden armor sitting on a throne… why hadn't he realized the truth after seeing the Bright Lord for the first time? It was him. Gunlaug was the corpse in Cassie's vision.

Effie was the woman drowning in the sea of monsters. The archer… Sunny didn't know yet, but he was sure that they would meet soon.

Maybe only to die together.

He had always known that Nephis was guided by some mysterious, overwhelming goal. He didn't know what that goal was, but it was certainly not here, on the Forgotten Shore. To achieve it, Changing Star had to find a way to return to the real world.

That's why she had always been so unwavering and relentless in her ambition to move forward, overcome any obstacle, endure any pain. At times, it even seemed as though her conviction was more akin to an obsession. Nephis was willing to do anything to fulfill her dream.

The comforting words she had told him on their first day in the Dark City suddenly resounded in his mind. Only now, there was another, colder, and much darker meaning hiding beneath their surface:

"We will find a way to return. No matter what has to be done, we will."

No matter what has to be done…

There was only one way to leave the Forgotten Shore, and it lay in the Crimson Spire. No Sleeper could ever hope to reach that Gateway in one piece. They would need an army to even try. Maybe then, walking on corpses, one or two survivors would be able to escape from this cursed place.

But Nephis didn't have an army.

…Yet.

To gather one, she would need to kill Gunlaug, usurp his power and eliminate all opposition, drowning the Bright Castle in blood. Only then would she be able to rally every single Sleeper left in the Dark City and lure them into following her on a suicidal crusade. Knowing all too well that most of them would die because of it.

No sane person would follow her.

'They won't. Right?'

Sunny remembered the faces of the young men and women that had

become part of their group in the last few weeks. The strange light of hope, or maybe faith, burning in their eyes. The almost religious reverence they felt toward Nephis… no, not Nephis. Toward Changing Star of the Immortal Flame clan.

Their personal angel.

Were they sane, still?

Finally, he understood every part of Neph's plan.

Looking at the beautiful young woman with silver hair, Sunny shivered.

And then… there was the last part of the prophecy.

***

On their way back, Sunny felt as though he was in a feverish dream. The magnitude of the revelation was too… too much for him. His mind felt weak, unsteady, and on the verge of breaking apart.

He had never experienced such a deep feeling of shock. It was as though the very core of his being was violently shaken. He wasn't equipped with the right tools to cope with it.

It felt as if he was on the verge of losing it.

Sunny was truly horrified.

'Don't… don't waste time trying to deal with your emotions. This is not the right time for feelings. You need to… to figure out how all of this affects you personally, and what you need to do to turn things to your advantage.'

After all… what was there to be scared of? That many people would die? What did their lives and deaths have to do with him?

Yes… yes. As long as he was the one left standing in the end, this whole thing might actually turn out to be beneficial. Hadn't he spent the last weeks being afraid of what Gunalug was going to do to them? Well, now he knew that Gunlaug was going to end up as a

corpse. Problem solved.

Wasn't he crushed by the news that he would spend the rest of his life in this odious hell? Well, now that wasn't a certainty anymore. That last part of the prophecy…

Everything was well. Better than ever.

…And yet, no matter how much Sunny was trying to be rational, he just couldn't help but be filled with terror.

***

In the crimson light of sunset, he found a reason to leave the lodge and walked to the edge of the stone platform. No one really cared that much about his whereabouts, so it wasn't hard to disappear for a while.

No one noticed that something was bothering Sunny, either. They were all accustomed to his moody behavior, anyway. Only Cassie seemed to have picked up on something.

...And Caster, who pretended to be carefree, but actually had a habit of watching anyone close to Nephis like a hawk.

The bastard...

Reaching the very end of the stone platform, Sunny turned around and looked at the outer settlement and the magnificent castle towering above it, with hundreds of Sleepers rushing to find shelter before the coming of night. A cold and harrowing feeling gripped his heart.

'All these people… all these people are going to die.'

Neph was going to kill them.

...Was he willing to help her do it?

For some reason, Sunny wanted to laugh. This whole situation was so sick and appalling that it was almost ridiculous. He was never an altruistic type, really. More than that, he always prided himself on

being a cynical, selfish, and vicious person. But this... this was too much even for him.

Grabbing his head, Sunny moaned.

'What am I going to do?!'

At that moment, the sound of steps suddenly attracted his attention. A gaunt figure appeared from the slum and walked toward him.

Sunny frowned.

'Oh, right. That guy…I had completely forgotten about him.'

Harper stopped a few paces away and smiled timidly.

"Sunless! Uh… can we talk?"

Chapter-161: Rubicon

Harper stared at him with that pathetic timid smile frozen on his lips. In his eyes, there was fake friendliness, worry, and desperation. For some reason, Sunny felt a violent urge to erase the smile of his face.

'You scum…'

In his rattled state, he was having trouble controlling his emotions. Something must have shown on his face, because Harper suddenly blinked and took a step back. But in the end, the desire to be allowed back into the Bright Castle won over his caution. He forced himself to stay still, hesitated for a few moments, and said:

"I… I wanted to thank you for inviting me into your home this morning."

Sunny looked at the gaunt young man. In the twilight of dusk, his pale face was hidden in deep shadows. Finally, he answered:

"Yeah. We can talk."

'Think, Sunny, think…'

But his mind was refusing to obey. Most of it was drowning in the sea of cold terror that had been summoned by the revelation of the future. What little remained was utterly disoriented.

Sunny raised one hand and rubbed his face.

'He's a spy. He's here to make it easier for Gunlaug to kill us. What should be done?'

In the morning… yes, back before everything changed, Sunny had seen Harper reporting to one of the Guards. He wanted to give the cowardly young man a beating and throw him out of the lodge… but

that would be a wrong decision.

The best thing to do was not to expose the unfortuante spy, but to feign ignorance and feed him false information. Yeah… that was the optimal way to deal with moles. As an aspiring spy himself, Sunny knew these things well.

But would he even able to deceive Harper? By accident, the failed informant had chosen a perfect person as his mark. Sunny knew a lot of secrets and was incapable of lying.

But he was also a master of deception. So…

"Sunless?"

Sunny flinched and glanced at the gaunt young man.

"Sorry. Uh… I'm a bit out of sorts after today's hunt. You wanted to talk?"

Reassured, Harper smiled again.

"You see, I wanted to thank you for everything that you had done for me, and for all the people here in the settlement. When I left the castle, I brought a very special item with me. I thought of sharing it with you!"

Sunny frowned.

"A special item?"

'I should see what his plan is exactly, feed him a couple of little truths along with the lies, and then report to Neph in the morning. R—right?'

Harper, meanwhile, was nodding energetically:

"It's a… a bottle of liquor. Every month, a few are sold by the Artisans working in the garden. Getting one is very hard, but I was lucky. Would you like to come and try? My hut is nearby."

Sunny got distracted for a few moments, but then forced himself to

concentrate. What was Harper talking about? Artisans, liquor, luck…

'...Why not?'

Giving Harper a nod, he gestured for the young man to lead the way and followed.

As they passed other slum dwellers on their way to Harper's hovel, Sunny couldn't help but feel like they were surrounded by walking corpses.

Most of these people were already dead. They just didn't know it yet.

…But he did.

The weight of this knowledge was slowly crushing him.

Harper's small hut was even more pathetic than the other hovels in the slum. It was crudely constructed out of rotting pieces of wood, with plenty of cracks to let the cold wind in. Inside, there was nothing except for a pile of seaweed thatch that served as a flimsy mattress and a low wooden table. Sunny could understand why the gaunt Sleeper was so desperate to return to the castle.

At least there was a door.

Once inside, Harper looked around with embarrassment and invited Sunny to sit on the floor in front of the table. Then, he dug a glass jar from beneath the seaweed and placed it in front of him like a rare treasure. Producing a crude iron knife from somewhere, Harper then opened the wax seal of the jar, placed the knife on the table, and poured a milky white liquid into a chipped clay cup.

"Here!"

He handed the cup to Sunny and smiled.

Sunny received it and smelled the strange liquor. He remembered many people in the outskirts who had drowned themselves in the bottle or killed themselves with cheap stimulants and drugs. Luckily, he was always too paranoid to allow anything to alter his mental state. Plus, for a long time, he couldn't allow himself to die before

accomplishing a certain thing.

That's why Sunny was not too familiar with alcohol.

Bringing the cup to his lips, he held his breath and downed it in one go. A pleasant warmth immediately spread through his body, bringing with it a bit of sweet solace.

'...I can see the appeal.'

It wasn't too bad, really.

Harper hurriedly refilled the cup and asked:

"I heard about the latest hunt. By gods, you have survived an encounter with a Spire Messenger! That must have been horrible…"

Sunny lingered for a bit, then shrugged.

"I just stood at the back."

The gaunt young man shook his head.

"Still. You are incredible! I hear that you have been with Lady Changing Star from the very beginning, surviving more than two months in the Labyrinth. Is this true?"

He was a really bad actor. Even if Sunny didn't know that Harper was a spy already, he would have sensed something strange at this point. But it was easy to pretend not to notice anything.

'Rats like me will tell you everything as long as you show them a tiny bit of respect, huh?'

Flushed because of the liquor, Sunny slowly smiled:

"Oh… yes! In fact, if it wasn't for me, she would have been long dead. Do you know how many times I saved her life?"

This part was entirely planned, aimed to create a false sense that Harper's plan to use pettiness and jealousy to loosen his tongue worked. However, the next words came out of Sunny's mouth on

their own.

Gritting his teeth, he suddenly paled and whispered:

"...and for what? Huh? For… for this? This wasn't supposed to happen. How did this happen?!"

Then, Sunny grabbed his head and forced out a dark laugh.

'This is bad… what am I even saying?'

Mistaking his terror for the sign of the liquor doing its job, Harper got a little braver:

"You must have fought side by side with Lady Nephis a lot!"

Sunny lowered his head, then shrugged.

"Yeah."

The gaunt young man hesitated for a few moments, then cautiously asked:

"So… you must have seen her Aspect Ability?"

Learn your enemy's Ability, learn their Flaw, learn their vices… that's how you kill them. Staring at Harper, Sunny suddenly remembered his first battle after meeting Nephis. Back then, she asked him if he had ever dissected a dead carapace scavenger to learn its weaknesses.

That's what the cowardly Sleeper was doing right now. Dissecting them. Even though they weren't dead… yet.

"Sure. It can be used to heal."

Harper eyes gleamed.

"So she's a healer! Of course. Such an Ability suits Lady Changing Star very well. Everyone knows that she's an angel…"

'Good…'

His first goal was achieved. Sunny had successfully created a

misunderstanding, leading Harper to believe that Neph's Aspect was limited to healing. There had to be other spies in the slum, of course. With them collaborating on that statement by recounting how she had healed the wounded hunters today, Gunlaug and his people would most likely believe that Changing Star had no offensive Ability.

Who would ever assume that her flames could both heal and destroy?

Harper, meanwhile, was pouring more liquor into the cup.

"By the way, I always wanted to ask. Do you know how Lady Nephis received her True Name?"

Maybe because of his terrible state of mind, or maybe because of the liquor, or maybe simply because of a momentary lapse of judgment, Sunny didn't think his next words through well enough before answering:

"Probably the same way I did."

Then, he froze.

'Curse you!'

He was so preoccupied with creating a false image of Neph in Harper's mind that, for a second, he had forgotten to keep his own true identity a secret.

'Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!'

Not letting the panic show on his face, Sunny tried to salvage the situation by throwing his head back and laughing, creating an impression that his last statement was a joke.

Luckily, Harper seemed to believe him. He laughed, too, and then glanced at Sunny with humorous sparks in his eyes.

However, his next words sent Sunny into a cold embrace of horror. It was as though the gates of hell opened right beneath his feet.

Wishing to play along, the gaunt young man grinned and said

jokingly:

"Oh! Of course, of course, Lord Sunless! What is your True Name then?"

Sunny stared at him, the smile frozen on his face.

'Think! Think! How do you get out of this?!'

But there was no way out, at least none that he could see. He was caught.

The familiar pressure appeared in his mind. Slowly, Sunny became deathly pale.

Harper was still grinning, waiting for the answer. His face was gaunt, tired, and full of both fear and desperate hope.

He was just a weak, pitiful kid, after all.

The pressure was replaced by blinding pain, sending a tremble running through Sunny's body.

Why, why did he have to ask that question?!

But it was too late. What happened couldn't be changed.

Like a cornered beast, Sunny could think of only one thing...

Harper finally sensed that something was wrong. His eyes widened.

"Sun…"

...how to survive.

Just a second before the pain overwhelmed his limits and forced out an answer, Sunny suddenly leaned forward, picked up the crude iron knife, and stabbed it through the poor young man's heart.

Chapter-162: Lost from Light

Pushing the knife into Harper's weak body, Sunny lunged forward. The flimsy wooden table flew aside and shattered into splinters once it hit the wall. With his other hand, he violently grabbed the young man's face and pressed him onto the floor, making sure that no sound would escape from his lips.

Harper's wide eyes were full of pain and terror, staring at Sunny with a silent, but deafening question.

…Why?

Feeling hot blood streaming down his hand, Sunny finally let the pain of the Flaw overwhelm him.

His whisper was hoarse and barely audible:

"Lost from Light! I am… Lost… Lost from Light…"

Harper's trembling fingers found his face and smeared it with blood, which then mixed with tears. He weakly tried to push Sunny away, but there was no strength in his arms anymore.

Biting his lips hard enough to break the skin, Sunny held the gaunt young man down and twisted the knife, praying for all of this to be over soon.

'Don't look at me… please, don't look at me…'

Finally, Harper's terrified, accusing eyes grew still and lightless. Sunny could feel the beating of his heart stop through the thin fabric of the young man's robe. Making sure that Harper was, indeed, dead, he finally let go of the knife and crawled away.

'Oh, gods…'

As though summoned by these words, the voice of the Spell whispered into his ear:

[You have slain Dreamer Harper.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

Contorted in a painful spasm, Sunny bent over and violently threw up. Then he weakly fell on the floor and tried to wipe his face, only to realize that he was spreading blood all over it.

'I killed him. I just killed a real human...'

A strange stillness took hold of Sunny. Sitting on the cold stones, he stared at the corpse of the young man that he had just killed and struggled to form a cohesive thought. After a while, he finally succeeded:

'Too much… oh, this is too much…'

All of this was too much for him. Why did he have to go through all of this? The slave caravan, the Forgotten Shore, Changing Star, and now Harper. What sin had he committed to have to go through this nightmare? Was he actually already dead, and imprisoned in the depths of hell?

'...Bullshit. He deserved it.'

Sunny gritted his teeth and forced himself to concentrate on that thought.

'Why do you even feel guilty? The bastard was going to sell you out to Gunlaug. He knew that he was helping to kill you. And not just you alone. Neph, too. And Cassie.'

But no matter how hard he tried to convince himself that he had the right to kill Harper, deep down, he could not accept it. There were a million ways to deal with the timid, pitiful spy. No… there was another reason…

'Come on now… there's no one else here. Why don't you be honest with yourself, for once? Just admit it. Don't you dare become a

hypocrite.'

Sunny grimaced and ground his teeth against each other.

'Say it!'

Reluctantly, he opened his mouth and whispered:

"I killed him because I wanted to survive. I killed him… because it was easy."

And just like that, he suddenly felt better.

What's the big deal? He was already a murderer, anyway.

He was planning to help Nephis kill hundreds of people.

Affected by the irony of the situation, Sunny barely stopped himself from laughing.

He didn't want to make too much noise. Breaking that table was already a mistake. What if someone comes to check on the commotion?

That would be bad. That would be embarrassing.

Right… what was he going to do with the body?

Instead of coming up with an answer, Sunny leaned forward and threw up again.

…When he sat straight after a while, the door of the hut was open.

And there, in the doorframe, his face pale, stood none other than Caster.

With a stunned expression on his face, the proud Legacy was taking in the sight. The broken table, the smell of alcohol in the air, the bloodied body with a knife sticking out of its chest, and disheveled Sunny kneeling on the floor, his hands and face smeared with fresh blood.

'Oh, no!'

"This… this is not…"

However, no words came to his mind. No matter what he would say, the situation was not going to appear any better.

Looking him straight in the eyes, Caster asked with horror in his voice:

"Sunny… what did you do?"

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Sunny blinked and stared at the handsome young man. After a few moments, he opened his mouth and said:

"What do you think? I killed the bastard."

His voice was calm and nonchalant. It didn't matter how Sunny felt inside. In front of Caster, he couldn't show any weakness.

He didn't trust the proud scion of the Han Li clan one bit. There had always been something off about him.

So… if there was ever a time for acting, it was now. Especially because, unlike everyone else in the slum, Caster already knew that Sunny wasn't as useless as everyone believed. He had known it ever since that night when the three of them fought a devil together.

"Killed the… why did you kill him?!"

Sunny stood up and shrugged.

"He was asking too many questions."

Caster opened his mouth, stunned, then closed it again. After a few moments, he suddenly frowned:

"What kind of questions?"

It seemed as though he had realized something.

…Come to think of it, what was he even doing here?

"Oh, you know. Do I know Nephis well, what her Ability is, how did she get her True Name, stuff like that."

Without giving Caster the ability to react, Sunny wiped his hands with a bit of seaweed and added:

"Actually, this guy, Harper, was sent over to spy on us by Tessai. I caught him making a report to a Castle Guard officer this morning."

Caster remained silent for a while, then asked quietly:

"Do you have any proof of that?"

Sunny glared at him and raised an eyebrow.

"...Is my word not proof enough?"

A wild thought suddenly appeared in his mind.

'Will I have to kill Caster, too?'

Would he even be able to, if it came to that?

Not likely.

"Why, you don't believe me?"

Bad, bad. The situation was really bad. Depending on Caster's next words, Sunny could find himself in a sea of trouble. And he was powerless to do anything about it.

Anxious and uneasy, he stared at Caster.

The proud Legacy lingered. After a while, he came inside and closed the door behind him.

"No, I believe you. Actually, I suspected this kid myself. That's why I came here after hearing that the two of you were seen going somewhere together. But, Sunny… the others… the others might not think the same."

He smelled the air and grimaced.

"I am sorry to say that, but you have a reputation for having a bad temper. With alcohol added into the mix and no proof to connect Harper to the Castle… you can see how this does not look good."

'That piece of crap!'

Sunny scowled, trying to pretend that he was calm. He saw where this was going...

"So? What are you going to do?"

Caster gripped his shoulder. Then, in a serious and grave voice, he said:

"What else? I will help you conceal everything, of course. We are comrades, after all. But, Sunny… no one can ever know what you have done here. Especially Lady Nephis. This will be… this will be our secret.

Alright?"

Saying that, he looked Sunny right in the eyes... and smiled.

Chapter-163: The Past

Sunny stared at Caster with a grim expression. Despite the amiable smile and reassuring voice, he knew what the handsome Legacy was doing.

He grew up in the outskirts, after all.

Caster had said "I will help you."

But what he actually meant was "I will own you."

Because there was no better leverage than a gruesome secret. This help of his was going to come at a price.

But what choice did Sunny have, really? Unless he was ready to fight and kill Caster right there and then, thus silencing the only witness of his crime forever, he couldn't refuse.

Plus… what Caster thought was going to happen and what would really happen was not as set in stone as it seemed. As long as Sunny was alive, there was hope of turning things around, somehow.

He just had to get through this, one step at a time.

Sunny forced out a smile.

"Thank you, Caster. I won't… won't forget it."

Then, he glanced at the dead body lying at his feet and took a step back, escaping the quickly growing puddle of blood. His face remained calm, but a small, almost imperceptible shiver ran through his body.

"So… what do we do now?"

The proud Legacy lingered, then said in a solemn tone:

"First things first, we can't let anyone see you like this. Wait here for a while. I'll bring something for you to clean yourself."

Sunny sighed. He didn't really want to stay anywhere near Harper, but Caster was right. Walking around covered in blood was a bad idea.

"And then what?"

Caster hesitated.

"Then we will need to get rid of the body. But… it won't be easy to do without being noticed, if not by slum rats, than by Guards. Don't worry, though… I'll think of something. Just wait for me to return."

Sunny hesitated, wondering if he could trust the Legacy. What was going to stop him from returning with a crowd of people? But no. Having Sunny in his pocket would benefit Caster more than getting rid of him completely.

Still, he sent the shadow to keep an eye on things after the handsome young man went away.

Left alone with the corpse, Sunny sighed and sat on the floor, resting his back against the flimsy wall of the hut. He was so tired.

The night was slowly descending on the ruins, drowning everything in comforting darkness. Of course, he could still see the bloodied body lying motionless on the stones beside him. For the first time, Sunny wished that his eyes weren't able to pierce through the shadows.

Harper's eyes were still open, staring at him accusingly.

'I am… I am stuck with you forever, aren't I?'

Without even looking into the Soul Sea, Sunny knew that a new shadow had joined the silent ranks of every creature he had ever killed.

All he could do was wait.

Time slowly crawled.

It was taking Caster a long time to gather everything needed without raising any suspicion. He had to avoid prying eyes and waste a lot of time conversing with people who constantly wanted to win his attention. At some point, even Cassie talked to him:

"Hey, Caster. Have you seen Sunny?"

Away from their lodge, sitting on the floor near the corpse of a young man he had killed, Sunny smiled darkly and listened to what kind of excuse the Legacy would come up with to account for his absence.

After a while, his thoughts began to wander. He listened to the sound of rain falling on the stones outside and scowled. Rain always put him in a bad mood.

Because of it, Sunny was always reminded of the past.

Unlike Nephis, whose past was clouded in mystery and screamed of tragedy, he came from a simple background. His story was more mundane than tragic. A trivial story of unfortunate people living hard and bitterly in a dying world.

Sunny's parents were both menial workers. They were poor, but not destitute. His dad was employed by one of the numerous maintenance crews that took care of the city's outer barriers. His mom worked in an underground factory that produced air filtration systems. Together, their income was barely enough to afford a small cell in one of the human hives in the outskirts.

Several months after his sister, Rain, was born, when Sunny was around four, his father was killed in a work accident, which was not a rare occurrence among the city maintenance workers. Three years after that, his mother got sick and eventually passed away. Factory workers like her often got sick and died due to the harsh conditions, so it wasn't a rare outcome, either.

Sunny and Rain were sent to a government child care facility. His sister was young and cute, so she was eventually adopted. Sunny, however, was older and had "behavioral problems", which made him

pretty much completely undesirable. After enduring a few years in a series of increasingly vile foster homes, he finally managed to run away and learned how to survive on the streets of the outskirts.

Out there on the streets, there were a lot of kids just like him, who had to do all sorts of distasteful things every day just to live to see another sunrise. However, even then, most of them didn't last long. It took a very special kind of creature to survive there.

Sunny was one such creature.

A part of this was pure luck, a part of it was that he was smart. But mostly, it was because he had a goal. Sunny refused to die before finding his sister.

Somehow, he had convinced himself that she was waiting for him to find and save her. One day, they were going live happily again, like a family, together. This misguided goal kept him alive more than anything else.

…Of course, it didn't end well.

Nothing ever did in this damn world.

Sitting just a few centimeters away from a puddle of human blood, Sunny chuckled and rubbed his face.

Was there even such a thing as a happy ending?

'What is taking that bastard so long?'

Granted, he knew exactly where Caster was, and what he was doing.

Currently, he was raising his hand to open the door of Harper's hut.

Sunny tiredly picked himself up from the floor and shook off the weight of reminiscence.

What was the point of remembering the past? He had to survive the future…

Chapter-164: Parting

Caster brought him water, strips of cloth, and a crude tunic.

While Sunny was washing the blood off his body, the proud Legacy carefully moved Harper's corpse into a corner, buried it under the pile of seaweed thatch, and wiped the blood off the floor as much as he could.

This way, an accidental glance inside the hut would not reveal too much. Of course, even a little bit of scrutiny, and the signs of what had happened here would become apparent.

While doing all this, Caster was speaking:

"The easiest way to get rid of a corpse is to simply toss it off the platform. With luck, it won't land on the road. But even if it does, no one would pay it a lot of attention. People die all the time out here in the Dark City, especially those living in the outer settlement."

He paused, then continued:

"However, we can't do that — because Harper isn't just a random slum rat, but someone who was working for the Bright Lord. The Guards will become interested in his sudden death, and they'll use it to create trouble for you and Lady Nephis. So we need to make him disappear completely. That won't be easy."

Sunny glanced at him and frowned.

"What's the big deal? I can just carry him down the hill and dump the body somewhere in the ruins. It's night outside. No one will see anything."

Caster shook his head.

"Castle Guard has various types of observers watching the road day and night. You will be noticed. Unless someone persuades them to look the other way, of course."

He sighed.

"It won't be cheap, but I can make it happen. Tomorrow after sunset, you will have about an hour to carry the body to the ruins and return. Sorry, but I can't buy you more time… this will wipe what little shards I have left already."

His voice sounded as though the handsome young man was genuinely concerned for his comrade, but in reality, he was just reiterating how much Sunny owed him now.

And if that message was not enough, he could always threaten to reveal the secret of how Harper died in the future.

Caster had him in the palm of his hand.

Sunny smiled darkly.

"And what do I do until then?"

The Legacy shrugged:

"Just act natural and try not to speak to anyone. You're kind of a loner as it is. No one will suspect anything."

After that, he thought for a few moments and added:

"Oh. This... no one should enter this hut for a long while. Harper lived in the castle for these past few months, so people in the slum won't notice his absence yet. Neither will Guards, since he made a report recently. We should be fine."

Sunny stared at him with a strange expression.

"What?"

He shook his head.

"No, nothing. I'm just wondering how many bodies did you make disappear already."

Caster frowned.

"This is my first, actually. In the Dark City, it is usually more advantageous to leave the body somewhere where everyone can see."

Made sense. Why kill someone if not to make others think twice before attacking you in the future?

Sunny was a real amateur when it came to murder. He really could not compete with the Legacies.

Just like that, they left the pitiful hut behind and returned to the lodge. With no one paying him any attention, Sunny returned to his room and sat quietly on his narrow cot.

He thought that he wouldn't be able to sleep this night, tormented by both the knowledge of what Nephis was planning and the memories of Harper dying by his hand.

But in the end, his exhausted consciousness slipped into oblivion as soon as his head touched the pillow.

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In the morning, he woke up with a start, expecting a crowd of furious slum dwellers to be rushing inside, all eager to…

Well, what could they really do? If push came to shove, very few of them could actually harm him.

But no one was there.

After hesitating for a while, he decided to act as he would on any other day. Leaving his room, Sunny walked outside to wash his face.

Neph's little helpers either greeted or ignored him, just like usual. Their smiles were friendly and fleeting.

No one looked at him twice.

Strangely disturbed, Sunny escaped the lodge and looked up at the sky.

Nothing had changed. Everything was the same as it had been yesterday, and every day before that.

How could… how could this be?

He had violently murdered someone, but no one seemed to care. The world had moved on without Harper, indifferent to the pain and horror that were now frozen forever in the dead eyes of the timid, pitiful young man.

Even the Guards did not seem to notice the disappearance of their spy.

Sunny rubbed his face, hiding a pained grimace. His head hurt with a terrible migraine.

'If they don't care, why should I? Forget about that fool.'

But he did care. Irrational as it was, he felt compelled to mourn the death of his victim, even if he was the only one who would. Maybe because this situation was eerily identical to how he had always imagined his own death to happen, utterly unnoticed.

Discarded and forgotten, with not a single soul to care that he had ever existed.

'Pathetic.'

Returning inside, Sunny entered his room and sat on the cot, staring at the wall.

He spent most of the day there, going out only once to pretend to train with the Midnight Shard. While he was repeating the katas, he thought that he caught sight of Nephis observing the movements of his sword with a frown on her face. But a second later, she was distracted and drawn away by the neverending torrent of tasks required of her.

'Good riddance! Go chat with Caster, see if I care!'

His sudden anger surprised Sunny.

Well, at least it was better than the grim apathy that reigned over him this whole day.

'What's wrong with my mind lately? It's like I'm back on the Ashen Barrow.'

Frowning, he dismissed the Midnight Shard and returned to his room.

However, someone was waiting for him there. It was Cassie.

The blind girl stood silently with her back to the door, holding the wooden staff in her hands. Her face was unusually still. It almost looked… bleak.

Sunny's heart skipped a bit.

'Did she… did she find out?'

Forcing out a fake grin, he made his voice sound cheerful and said:

"Oh, hey Cas. Do you want something?"

She turned to him and, after a moment of hesitation, smiled. However, something about her smile was off.

It was almost as though it was as forced as his own.

The blind girl lingered, then said:

"No, nothing in particular."

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

'What's up with her today?'

Meanwhile, Cassie raised her hand and found his shoulder.

"No… actually, I have a present for you."

He raised his eyebrow.

"A… present?"

She nodded. In the next moment, a spark of energy suddenly traveled from her body into his.

Sunny flinched.

[You have received a Memory: Endless Spring.]

Wasn't it… that pretty glass bottle of hers, one that contained an almost endless amount of water?

Why was she giving it to him?

"Why are you gifting me this all of a sudden?"

She was silent for a few moments, then gently shook her head.

"I just wanted to. Why? Can't I give you something, after everything that you have done for us?"

Sunny hesitated.

"I guess you can. I just didn't expect it."

Cassie gripped his shoulder and remained motionless for a weirdly long amount of time. Then, she looked away and said, her voice light and even:

"We'll meet again soon, Sunny."

'Weirdo.'

He patted her hand and said, a little embarrassed.

"Of course we will. Where would I go? This lodge is too small for us not to bump into each other all the time anyway."

She slowly removed her hand and chuckled.

"Yeah. You're right, of course. I'll… I'll go now."

With that, she turned away and headed for the door.

Sunny stared at her back and shrugged.

"Alright. Bye."

'What has gotten into her?'

Reaching the doorway, Cassie froze for a second. Without turning her head and letting him see her face, she lingered for a while, then quietly said:

"...Goodbye, Sunny."

Chapter-165: Power

For the rest of the day, Sunny had nothing to do but count the hours until sunset. When the night descended, he would have to return to the scene of the crime he had committed, retrieve the body of his victim, and carry it into the ruins under the cover of darkness.

'How did it come to this?'

Alone in his tiny room, he stared at the wall and waited. Soon, the fear of going into the Dark City at night overpowered the bleak and hollow feeling that reigned over his soul.

People rarely risked leaving the hill after the dark. In the starless void of the Forgotten Shore, any source of light was bound to attract the attention of creatures that no human would even want to meet. Countless horrors stalked the streets of the city at night.

Only a madman would risk entering the ruins after the sun was gone.

...Of course, there were plenty of madmen in the Dark City.

Sunny, at least didn't need any light. He also knew the area surrounding the Bright Castle well enough to avoid most danger. The weeks he had spent learning from Effie didn't go to waste.

'I should be fine.'

With the shadows hiding his every movement, Sunny was sure of his ability to at least run away should something happen.

Still, with each passing minute, his heart felt colder and colder. When the shadow of the Crimson Spire drowned the world and colored his thoughts with the eerie feeling of dread, he gritted his teeth.

'It's almost time.'

However, before the sun completely disappeared, another unexpected guest appeared at the doorstep of his room.

Looking at Sunny with a scowl, Nephis gestured for him to stand up and said in an even tone:

"Come with me."

Sunny's heart skipped a bit.

'What… what does she want?'

Suppressing the sickly fear of being caught, he lingered for a few moments, then slowly stood up and followed Changing Star out of the lodge.

Together, the two of them walked to a secluded part of the slum. Neph remained silent, not even looking in his direction. She seemed calm, like always.

Sunny, however, struggled to keep himself from panicking. Various thoughts, one darker than the other, found their way into his head.

'Did that bastard, Caster, tell her everything?'

Finally, they reached the remote alley where no one would have been able to overhear their conversation. It was filled with nothing but the crimson light of sunset and deep shadows.

Turning around, Changing Star looked at him with a frown. Sunny met her gaze, his face grim. He felt as though he was staring at his judge and executioner.

"I've seen you practicing with the sword today. Your moves were weak and aimless. It was as if you had lost all clarity. What were you thinking about?"

Sunny slowly exhaled.

So, that's what this was about. She didn't know anything. She just picked up on the turmoil raging in his mind.

He should have felt relieved, but for some reason, Sunny felt anger rising in his chest instead.

With a crooked smile, he looked away and answered:

"Murder. I was thinking about murder."

Nephis tilted her head, waiting for an explanation. Sunny remained silent for a few moments, then said, his voice strangely cold:

"You once told me that the essence of combat is murder, didn't you?"

She gave him a nod.

He stared at her, then said:

"Well, how come you know so much about murder, Neph? Huh? I wanted to ask you that since the day you cut off Andel's head without so much as batting an eye. You are out here preaching about how we are all fellow humans, not some beasts. Was Andel not human?"

She scowled.

"Is this what it's all about?"

Sunny gritted his teeth.

"It's a part of it."

Nephis was silent for a long time. At some point, she absentmindedly raised one arm and rubbed her neck. Finally, she said:

"It's not that I have murdered a lot of people. It's that a lot of people have tried to murder me."

Sunny blinked.

"Why would anyone want to kill you?"

She smiled.

"Why? All kinds of reasons, really. My family was really powerful once, don't you remember? But power… it's a dangerous thing,

Sunny. You can't reach its peak without creating a lot of enemies. And when your power disappears one day, all those enemies remain."

Turning her face away, she said with her usual indifferent voice:

"I think I was what… five, six years old when someone tried to kill me for the first time? It was my nanny. She led me to an empty room, put her hands around my neck, and tried to strangle me. I thought that it was a game. For the first few seconds, at least."

Neph looked at him with white sparks dancing in her eyes.

"That was how I learned what weakness is. And when my teacher, who happened to walk by, rushed inside and used his Aspect Ability to kill her… that was how I learned what strength is. So yes. I'm not a stranger to severed heads, Sunny. Is that what you wanted to know?"

He stared at her, then slowly shook his head.

How frightened she must have felt, how powerless. Powerlessness… he knew how it felt all too well. Somehow, Sunny had never imagined that proud and indomitable Changing Star had tasted it, too. Was shaped by it.

Just like he was.

Meanwhile, Nephis smiled. But there was no humor in her eyes.

"So then, what did you want to know? Huh, Sunny? What is this all about? Do you think I haven't noticed the way you were staring at me ever since we fought the Spire Messenger? Come clean with it. You owe me at least this much."

He glared at her for a long time, a storm of emotions written on his pale, grim face. Finally making a decision, Sunny gritted his teeth and said:

"I want to know what your real goal is. I want to know if it's all worth it."

Chapter-166: Light and Shadows

Changing Star frowned. There was a hint of surprise visible in her cold, grey eyes.

"My… goal? Isn't it obvious?"

She gestured to the slum that surrounded them and the magnificent castle towering above it.

"I'm trying to help these people. What else?"

Sunny sighed.

Then, turning his face away, he asked:

"Hey, have I ever told you about my sister?"

Nephis blinked.

"No. Why bring this up all of the sudden?"

He smiled wistfully.

"I just was reminded of her recently, so I thought I'd share. You see… our parents died when we were little. She got adopted, but I ended up on the streets. Life wasn't really sweet for me. In fact, it was nothing but unsavory and bitter. So, young as I was, I simply imagined that it was the same for her.

That's why I got obsessed with the idea of finding her. I had this fantasy in my head, you know, of saving and protecting her. Becoming a family again."

Sunny grimaced.

"But how could a penniless undesirable like me find anyone? You

know how the city databases are. Even if they're functional, unsealing anything requires you to be a citizen, and one of a considerable rank, too. However, I was ready to do anything to accomplish my goal. So, I saved up money. A street kid can't earn much, but even then, I saved up as much as I could."

A dark expression appeared on his face.

"Even if I had almost nothing to eat, I would keep putting away the pathetic amount of credits I had earned through doing all kinds of horrid crap. And after four or five years of this, by the time I was nearly seventeen, I finally had enough to hire a private investigator."

He smiled.

"You see, there was this detective who sometimes hired us nobodies to gather information for him. His services weren't cheap, but I trusted him. Or in him, at least. So I gave all my money to that guy and told him to find my sister. And you know what? He did.

One day, about a month after we made the deal, he gave me a piece of paper with an address written on it. So I went there."

Nephis hesitated for a few moments, then asked in a quiet voice:

"So what happened? Did you meet your sister?"

Sunny rubbed his face, glanced at the sky, and said:

"Sort of. I actually met her near the tram terminal. Only at that time, I didn't recognize her. You see, despite my lofty ideas of being her savior, I couldn't even really remember what she looked like. There was this girl, around twelve years old, wearing a tidy school uniform. She was walking in the same direction as me.

I only realized that it was her after she entered the house from the address."

He was silent for a while, then continued, his voice strangely emotionless:

"It was already dark. I think it was raining. The house was situated in

a really nice district. They actually had the whole house to themselves. Just one family living in it, can you imagine? Well, I guess you can.

Anyway… there was even a lawn. And a window… a big window that shined light outside. Watching them through that window was almost like watching a television show."

Sunny remembered the splendor of it, his own embarrassing astonishment, and tried to smile. However, he failed.

"Standing in the shadows just outside the edge of that light, I observed her family for a while. She had parents who loved her and treated her well. She had real food, and enough of it to never go hungry. She had pretty clothes and expensive textbooks. She even had cute younger siblings. They were all smiling, laughing, and having a great time together."

Neph looked at him and asked:

"So what did you do?"

Sunny didn't answer immediately. Instead, he remembered how he just stood there, watching those happy people. How he looked down at his own frail body, his dirty and ragged clothes, the bruises on his bloodied knuckles. And realized how utterly out of place he was in that picture.

After years of dreaming of finding his sister and saving her, he was faced with the simple fact that she… she never really needed him. She probably didn't even remember that he existed. More than that, returning into her life would not bring anything good to her. He didn't have anything pleasant or beneficial to offer. He could only make things worse.

Out there on that dark and rainy night, while Sunny was standing in the shadows, something in his heart was extinguished forever. Something inside him died.

No matter what kind of situation he would find himself in after this, nothing would really compare to the darkness he felt in that single

moment.

After remaining motionless for a long time, he slowly backed away, turned around, and walked into the darkness.

…A few days after that, he began showing the first symptoms of being infected by the Nightmare Spell.

And the rest was history.

Shaking off the unpleasant memories, Sunny pretended to be carefree and shrugged.

"I did the only selfless thing that I have ever done. I turned around and went away. Do you know why?"

Nephis slowly shook her head.

Sunny grinned, the anger finally finding its way into his eyes.

"Because even a cretin like me was able to realize that the person he wanted to save didn't need his saving. So please tell me, Neph, why is it that you, with all your intelligence and clarity, can't seem to do the same?"

She stared at him, a deep frown appearing on her face.

"Are you implying that I lied about my intention to help these people? If so, you are wrong."

Sunny clenched his fists. Before he could stop himself, words flew out of his mouth.

…No. To be completely honest with himself, he had to admit that he simply did not want to stop them. He was too exhausted, hurting, and shaken to keep playing this game with Neph. It was time to bring everything to light.

Maybe then, he would be able to regain clarity.

Glaring at Changing Star, Sunny spat:

"...Fuck you, Neph."

She blinked.

"What?"

He smiled crookedly.

"I said go fuck yourself with that bullshit… Saint Nephis. You might have fooled everyone else, but I know you. I know you better than anyone else. So I don't buy your whole savior act even for a second."

Sunny repeated her gesture, pointing at the surrounding hovels.

"Help these people? Please! What are you going to help them with? Help them turn into corpses? You and I both know how this ends. Cassie already told us.

Fire and rivers of blood, right? Is this what you're planning?"

Nephis stared at him, a dark expression written on her ivory face. Her cold grey eyes weren't calm anymore. Finally, there was a burning emotion in them. Was it… confusion? Pain? Disappointment?

She opened her mouth, then closed it again. Then, Changing Star slowly shook her head.

Finally, she seemed to find the right words. Looking Sunny right in the eyes, she slightly raised her chin and said:

"...Fine. You got me."

Chapter-167: Unforgivable

Sunny stared at Nephis, stunned by her answer. He didn't expect her to admit it so easily.

Meanwhile, she just shrugged.

"What? Was I supposed to deny it? Why should I? You are the one who is obsessed with lies, Sunny, not me."

The corner of Changing Star's mouth twitched.

"Actually, I have to thank you. If it wasn't for you, I would have never learned how to deceive people so easily. I had a very sheltered upbringing, for obvious reasons. Communicating with others had always been something I knew very little about."

She smiled darkly.

"How fortunate it was to meet you, of all people, on this forsaken shore. Lucky me. Right?"

Sunny blinked. What was she talking about? He remembered how, during their journey to the Dark City, Nephis had tried to mimic Cassie in how she spoke to people. Had she been studying him, too?

Neph took a step forward and pierced him with an intense, burning gaze.

"No one survives in the Dream Realm alone. I knew that I won't be an exception to this rule, so I watched Cassie and you and tried my hardest to learn from you both. That's when I noticed that nothing you ever said — or did — was true. Wasn't it?"

'Crap.'

Sunny felt a cold shiver running down his spine.

She scoffed.

"No matter what happened, you somehow always managed to keep your real thoughts, desires, and reasons hidden. I've never seen anyone so adept at deception. Congratulations, Sunny! The mind games you played with us were almost as devious as the mental hex of the Soul Devourer. It was nothing short of inspiring."

Changing Star paused and shook her head.

"You can even easily turn truths into lies. How… brilliant. I never even knew that such a thing was possible. Silly me. I didn't know a lot of things before I met you."

She smiled.

"So, you see… while you were learning how to use a sword from me, I was learning how to use people from you. So please, Sunny, accept my sincere gratitude. I could not have wished for a better teacher. Without you, none of this would have been possible!"

Nephis raised her hand and stabbed a finger at him. Then, with anger in her voice, she spat:

"So where do you get the audacity to blame me for doing the same thing you do to everyone you ever meet?"

Sunny trembled. Was she telling the truth? Did Neph actually learn how to be this manipulative and vile… from him?

'Oh, no…'

Someone that inexperienced couldn't have found a worse role model even if they tried. What a cruel twist of fate, to be sent into the Dream Realm together with a damaged, vicious man like him...

Sunny gritted his teeth.

"That's not the same…"

Changing Star scowled.

"How is what I am doing different? I haven't told a single lie to these people. I gave them just enough truth to make them deceive themselves, just like you taught me. But what, now that it was turned around on you, it is suddenly not fair? Now you won't settle for anything less than the whole truth?"

She smirked.

"Fine. I'll tell you. Yes, you are right. There's going to be fire and rivers of blood. That is my plan. So what?

How is it worse than this pathetic, hopeless existence? It isn't. I am going to kill Gunlaug. After he is dead, the Bright Castle will become engulfed in a civil war, with each of the five lieutenants vying for the throne. I am going to kill them, too. And when I am the last one standing…"

Her eyes glistened.

"...I will gather those of us who remain alive and make a road of bones for the lucky few to reach the Gateway. That is my promise. That is the salvation I offer to the people of Dark City — a chance to return to the real world or die like a human should, standing tall and with a sword in their hand, instead of living in fear like a rat! I thought that you, of all people, would understand."

Sunny stared at her in disbelief. How could… how could she be so nonchalant about the idea of causing the deaths of so many people? Had their lives no value in her eyes?

But then he realized that he was looking at it all wrong. He was looking at it from his own perspective, the perspective of someone who was used to surviving at all costs, to putting survival above all else. However, that was how his old self had viewed the world.

After coming to the Forgotten Shore, Sunny had learned that there were things more valuable than staying alive. And he learned it from Neph.

To her, a life that was not worth living was that much worse than a worthy death. Maybe, in her mind, she really was trying to help these

people.

But who gave her the right to make that decision on their behalf?

Shaking his head, he whispered:

"Is it really so terrible to live here? Is Gunlaug really so bad that you would rather see all of us die than let us remain under his rule?"

A dark expression appeared on Changing Star's face. With cold contempt ringing in her voice, she said:

"Gunlaug has done many despicable things. But I won't judge him for those. Who knows if any of us would have done any better? Keeping a thousand hopeless people alive in this hell is the kind of task that can turn a saint into a demon. No… there is only one crime he committed that I can never forgive."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Which one?"

She lowered her chin and gritted her teeth:

"It's that he gave up."

She looked at Sunny and said, her voice full of intensity:

"It's that he never even tried to reach the Gateway. With so many years to prepare and hundreds of powerful fighters under his command… do you really think that there was nothing he could do to enter the Crimson Spire? No… no, he simply changed his mind. Why return if he can live like a king here, in the Dark City? He abandoned his duty as an Awakened and submitted to the Spell."

…And because of how he reigned, destroying people before they grew powerful enough to threaten his rule, Gunlaug also prevented anyone else from trying.

However, Sunny glimpsed something else from what Nephis had said. A hint of her true motivation. The words she chose to condemn Gunlaug were just too peculiar.

Despite the fact that the Bright Lord had committed all sorts of atrocious acts and caused the deaths, humiliation, and sorrow of countless people, the thing that enraged Changing Star the most was not his corruption and cruelty, but something entirely different.

The fact that he had submitted to the Spell and failed to complete his trial. Considering which family she hailed from...

Was this the key to her mysterious goal?

Frowning, Sunny asked:

"Don't you think that, maybe, he just wasn't willing to see hundreds of people die? All these young men and women living in the outer settlement and the Bright Castle… how many of them are you ready to sacrifice to achieve your goal?"

He grew silent, afraid that her answer would confirm his suspicion.

Neph straightened her back and glanced at him. Once again, her eyes were firm and calm. Without pausing to think, she said, not a shadow of a doubt in her voice:

"All of them. Of course."

Chapter-168: Outside

Sunny grimaced and turned away, feeling a terrible headache. The sun was almost gone, and the night was following in its footsteps. He didn't have much time left.

With a desperate smile, Sunny looked at Changing Star and asked:

"What can be so damn important? What can be so valuable that you are ready to condemn everyone here to death?!"

He shook his head, guessing that he already knew.

"Don't tell me that it's some stupid crap like bringing the glory of the Immortal Flame clan back. Duty of the Awakened? What, you gave a terrible oath to become the first human to conquer the Fourth Nightmare, like your father conquered the Third, and your grandfather the Second? Or even worse, is it something even more foolish? Are you planning to save the damn world?!"

Nephis stared at him for a few moments, and then grinned. Something dangerous and unfamiliar awakened in her eyes… no, not completely unfamiliar.

It was the same strange, maniacal glimmer he had seen once before, right after saying the three strange words to her.

Aster, Song, Vale.

Back then, for a few moments, Changing Star had turned from a calm and composed young woman into someone he wasn't sure he recognized anymore.

With a soft chuckle, Neph shook her head.

"Save the world? No, I'm not going to save the world, Sunny."

Then, the smile disappeared from her face, and white flames suddenly ignited in the depths of her cold, grey eyes. With dark and frightening conviction, she said:

"I'm going to destroy it."

Her words echoed in the darkness, making Sunny feel an irrational feeling of dread. He stared at her, both failing to comprehend and afraid to believe in what he had just heard.

Destroy... the world? What?

Deeply inhaling the cool air, Changing Star looked up at the sky.

"This world, Sunny. This cursed place. The Dream Realm. No, I won't be the first one to conquer the Fourth Nightmare. I will be the first one to conquer every Nightmare. I'll go through them one after another, destroying anything and anyone who stands in my way.

And when I get to the heart of the Nightmare Spell, I'm going to obliterate every part of it, I'm going to rip it to shreds, I'm going to decimate and bring it to ruin."

She looked him in the eyes and said:

"You think Gunlaug can stop me? You think a Fallen Terror can stop me? Those three ghouls can stop me? No, Sunny. Nothing will stop me. Anyone who dares will die.

I'll kill them all."

Taking a step back, Sunny stared at her with wide eyes.

He shivered, feeling something cold touch the back of his neck. Then, he grimaced and asked, a hint of anguish in his voice:

"Why? Why do you want to destroy the Spell so much?"

A corner of Changing Star's mouth curled up slightly. After a few moments, she simply said:

"Because I hate it."

Sunny blinked, stunned by the simplicity of that answer. If it was someone else, he would have thought that they were lying.

But Nephis lived in a strange, stark world. She did things simply because she wanted to, and apparently wanted to destroy an eternal, omnipotent existence simply because she hated it.

Why the hell not?

He closed his eyes and whispered.

"You are actually insane."

Neph smiled.

"What does it mean to be insane in a world that has gone mad? I would be wary of anyone who remained perfectly sane in this hell."

Then, she sighed.

"So, are we done here? Or do you have more questions? The sun is almost gone, so you'd better hurry up and ask them."

Sunny shook his head and said, his voice hoarse:

"...Yeah. Yeah, Neph. I'm done."

With that, he slowly turned around and took a step forward.

Left behind, Nephis frowned.

"Where are you going? Come back here."

He waved a hand and said in a suppressed tone, refusing to turn his head:

"Sorry. I have an errand to run. We'll... talk some other time."

Her frown deepened. Looking at his back, Changing Star gritted her teeth and called:

"I said come back, Sunny! This conversation isn't over! Come back here right now!"

But there was no answer.

Sunny had already disappeared into the shadows, leaving her standing alone in the alley that was brightly lit by the last light of the dying sunset.

***

Some time later, Sunny was walking through the ruins, Harper's dead body weighing on his shoulder. The young man was very gaunt back before he had been killed, so it wasn't much of a burden.

…Physically, at least.

It was the early hour of the night.

Surrounded by nothing but darkness, Sunny was left alone with his thoughts and emotions. But, strangely, both his heart and mind were empty. He couldn't be bothered to think or feel anything right now.

It was all just too much and too sudden.

Plus, he would much rather concentrate on not stumbling on some horrific monster. Ending up eaten by a Nightmare Creature right now would be very ironic, but still unpleasant.

He felt guilty about murdering Harper, but not enough to die while trying to dispose of the body. He would much prefer not to die for his sins.

Luckily, the area he was traversing was familiar to Sunny. He knew which streets were comparatively safe, and which he needed to avoid. Where the really horrible monsters lived, and where he could pass without being sensed by anything.

Finally judging that he was far away into the ruins, he found a partially collapsed house, climbed over the rubble, then hesitated for a few moments and threw the corpse inside. Harper's gaunt body rolled down the rocks and disappeared into the interior of the house, where no one would ever see it.

Here, done. That part, at least, was finished.

It was time to go back.

Sunny turned around and stared at the distant silhouette of the tall hill, with the magnificent castle standing on its top.

Right now, hundreds of people were sleeping there, either in the pitiful hovels of the outer settlement or in the safe and warm rooms of the ancient stronghold.

Neph, Cassie, and Effie were there.

Harus, Gemma, and Gunlaug the Bright Lord were there, too.

And many, many others.

And most of them were going to die.

Looking at the white marble walls of the castle, Sunny could see his future vividly. Watching helplessly as Changing Star builds her sect. Helping her defend herself from Gunlaug. Going on hunts, being invisible once he comes back. Afraid to get close to anyone, lest the same thing that happened to Harper repeats itself.

Up until the moment everything ends in bloodshed and terror.

Caster was there, too, waiting to use his leverage over Sunny to make him his obedient minion. Sunny wasn't deceived by the amiable personality of the handsome Legacy. He knew that nothing good was going to come of accepting his help.

...In the end, he just stood in the shadows and looked into the distance, at the tiny human enclave that persevered against all odds in the cursed nightmare of the Forgotten Shore like a lone glimmer of light.

After remaining motionless for a long time, Sunny quietly sighed, turned his back to it, and slowly walked into the darkness.

Chapter-169: Back to the Future

Three months later, Sunny was back at the castle.

Well, to be precise, he had returned here once before, to buy a few items that were hard to come by in the ruins. However, back then, Nephis and her cohort had been away on a hunt.

No such luck today. The moment he had been dreading for so long was finally here.

Hearing Changing Star's voice, Sunny slowly turned around, glanced at her, and forced out a smile:

"Hey, Neph. Long time no see."

He tried to sound casual, but a slight tremble betrayed the storm of emotions raging in his heart.

Why did she have to be here?!

The turmoil of their sudden meeting was exasperated by the fact of how different they looked. The past months only made Nephis appear more radiant and splendid. Her white armor was pristine and graceful, her silver hair clean and combed. Sunny, on the other hand, looked like a pile of dirt that had somehow come to life. Both he and the Puppeteer's Shroud had seen better days.

He didn't want to see her, but even more than that, he didn't want her to see him in this sorry state. What if Neph gets the ridiculous idea that he was somehow miserable after falling out with her?

Nonsense! He was doing better than ever. He lived in a palace, ate delicious food every day, and had even become incredibly wealthy. If anyone should be miserable, it would be her…

"You do realize that you said that out loud, do you?"

Sunny blinked, remembered where he was, and stared at Changing Star in shock:

"Huh… what?"

She smiled with a corner of her mouth.

"You just zoned out and mumbled "why did she have to be here" under your breath. That was not very polite."

Sunny hid his embarrassment behind a grin and said.

"Yeah, well… I meant it."

Neph sighed.

"I'm glad to see you too, Sunny. It's good that you're alive."

Trying to conceal his discomfort, he shrugged.

"What, you didn't expect me to survive without you?"

She looked at him for a while and slightly shook her head.

"No. On the contrary, I knew that you would be fine."

Then, she paused for a moment and added in a flat tone:

"After all, a cockroach like you is not easy to kill."

Sunny scoffed.

"Now who's being impolite?"

Nephis stared at him in confusion for a couple of moments, then chuckled.

"Oh, sorry. I meant it as a compliment…"

***

He was glad to see Neph, too. As much as Sunny wanted to deny it, he had desperately missed her calm presence. Somewhere along the way, without even noticing, he had grown reliant on having her by his side.

But meeting her was also a nightmare.

After all, nothing had really changed after their bitter quarrel. Even though the intensity of it all diminished, the future that Cassie had foretold was still inevitable.

Now that the initial shock of running into Changing Star disappeared, Sunny took a closer look at her.

Nephis looked… stronger. He didn't know how much soul essence she had been able to absorb while he was gone, but it seemed like it was a lot. Neph was always confident and arresting, but now, her presence grew to a completely new level.

But then again, he was not the same weak fool either. The Dark City had made him into a fearsome creature as well. The months he had spent hunting monsters in the absolute darkness of the cursed ruins turned him stronger, smarter, and much more deadly.

…If a little bit insane.

Sunny doubted that any human on the Forgotten Shore had killed as many powerful Nightmare Creatures as he had in the same amount of time. At least not in single combat.

'Don't go on a tangent and forget where you are again!'

With a flinch, Sunny realized that he had been silent for a long time. An awkward silence hung between them, threatening to make him look bad.

'Uh. I need to say something. Like… how have you been? No, that's a stupid question! How about…'

However, before he could speak, Nephis asked:

"So what brings you to the Bright Castle? Are you… are you back?"

Startled, he scratched the back of his head and scrambled to find an answer:

"Oh, you know. Just… doing some shopping."

She blinked.

"Shopping?"

"Wait, did that sound weird?"

Sunny's eyes widened.

"Wait, did I say that out loud again?!"

He slapped his mouth shut and looked at Changing Star in horror.

'Goddamit! Who knew that a habit of talking to myself would be so detrimental to keeping my dignity intact?!'

On the ground next to him, the shadow was having a swell time basking in his anguish. It was shaking its head and dying laughing.

Several seconds later, Sunny was finally able to speak again:

"Uh, yeah. Shopping. I have some soul shards to spare, so I wanted to buy a Memory. Or few."

Nephis looked at him for a while, then said:

"I see."

Then, she turned away and asked, her voice calm and even, as always:

"Do you want to go somewhere and talk?"

Sunny's heart skipped a bit. He gritted his teeth.

"Sorry. No can do. I'm… uh… waiting for someone."

Changing Star lingered for a few moments, then asked:

"You're hiding in that alley because you're… waiting for someone? Who are you waiting for, Sunny?"

He waved a hand.

"Oh, you know. A friend. Well… more like an associate, really. An acquaintance?"

Neph remained silent for a few moments, then said in an even tone:

"You can just say no. No need to invent some…"

But right at that moment, an enchanting voice came from the entrance of the alley:

"Sunny? Hey, are you here?"

Turning around, Sunny saw a beautiful young man with gorgeous auburn hair and mesmerizing green eyes enter the alley. He was wearing an armor made out of burnished brown leather and blue silk clothes beneath, all of which fit him perfectly. On his face, there was a bright smile.

It was Kai… Night… whatever his name was!

Sunny exhaled with relief.

"What do you mean, "invent"?! See, he's right…"

However, the words died on his lips. Because, when he turned to Changing Star, he saw something that he had never seen before.

Looking at the young man whom he had set free from the bottomless dark well, Nephis took a step back. Her face was pale, and her eyes were wide and glassy.

She seemed to be consumed by absolute, utter horror…

Chapter-170: Star-Crossed

Sunny had never seen Nephis show fear before, not to mention being truly horrified.

Instantly, every muscle in his body tensed, and a cold shiver ran through it.

'It can't be, it can't be!'

She was a person who faced demons and fearsome abominations without even flinching. What could scare her so much?

Was he mistaken? Was Kai an incarnation of some primordial evil after all? How could this be?!

Panicking, he turned back to face the charming young man and outstretched one arm, ready to summon the Midnight Shard. Not that it would help if even Changing Star was scared…

…But, to his surprise, Kai wasn't showing any signs of being an ancient terror. In fact, he was looking at him with a cute expression of confusion.

"Uh, Sunny? Who is your friend?"

No, it didn't make any sense. Not only was Sunny sure of his judgment, he had also seen multiple people greeting Night as though they knew and liked him. He couldn't be a Nightmare Creature.

Then what was wrong with Nephis?

Keeping his shadow's gaze on the charming archer, Sunny slowly turned back and glanced at Changing Star. She was still standing there, seemingly paralyzed by fear.

What was going on?

"Uh… Neph?"

She flinched and tore her eyes away from Kai. After a few seconds, Changing Star cautiously leaned forward and whispered:

"Sunny… what is Night doing here?"

He frowned.

"He's the friend I was telling you about."

She lingered, then shook her head:

"No, I mean what is he doing here?"

The emphasis was on the word "here".

'Where else would he be?'

Completely lost, Sunny struggled to understand what was going on. Maybe she knew something about the kidnapping? That didn't make sense. Finally, he said:

"I saved his life in the ruins, so he's doing me a favor in return."

Nephis stared at him with desperation, then shook her head again:

"No, I mean what is Night doing here, on the Forgotten Shore!"

Sunny scowled.

"Did you guys know each other in the real world?"

Nephis looked at him with a funny expression. She opened her mouth, then closed it again.

Finally, she forced herself to speak:

"You… you don't know who he is?"

Meanwhile, Kai, who was politely staying silent through this whole weird conversation, smiled dazzlingly and said:

"He really doesn't. Isn't it wonderful?"

Sunny gave him a dark look.

"How would I know who he is? Make sense, please."

Neph was silent for a while, then loudly whispered:

"That's Night, you idiot! Night from Nightingale! The Night!"

What was she going on about?! He had no idea what that meant!

Sunny rubbed his face with irritation:

"What are you talking about? What is a Nightingale?"

Nephis looked at Kai, paled even more, and finally said in a small voice:

"It's… only the best and most famous idol group of the last decade. Triple Orpheus winners, one hundred consecutive weeks at the top of all charts, six diamond albums. That… that Nightingale. That Night. The lead vocalist…"

Sunny simply stared.

'Wait. Are you telling me…'

Was she so out of it because Kai used to be a member of some stupid boy band in the past?

Changing Star was not horrified, she was… starstruck?

He remained silent for a while.

And then exploded into laughter.

'Gods… oh gods! Nephis is a fangirl! What the Spell, that's too funny…'

Come to think of it, when they first met, she had been wearing headphones the whole time. He should have realized that Neph was into music much earlier. Mighty and stoic Changing Star, brought

down by a dainty idol boy…

That was just too hilarious!

He wasn't even jealous. What were the chances of meeting her bias in the damn Dark City? You couldn't come up with that crap!

As he was dying from laughter, both Changing Star and Kai glared at him with difficult expressions. However, Sunny just couldn't stop. His laughter only died down after he began wheezing.

"Sorry, sorry. I just… didn't expect it. From you. Ha! Oh, gods. As for your question, Night has been here for about two and a half years.

He lives in the castle…"

Nephis seemed thoughtful for a few moments, then glanced at Kai with wide eyes.

"Two and a half years? But… but I thought that Nightingale was just on hiatus because of Gale's solo project…"

'Oh, there's a Gale, too. I can't even...'

Kai smiled apologetically.

"I'm afraid not. I have indeed spent all this time here, in the Dark City. My agency had to come up with some cover story, I guess. With how things are, they can't even spin things and release a posthumous album, poor guys. You know, since I'm not technically dead, or even Hollow. Just… asleep."

Neph gave him a shy nod.

"Oh. I see."

Trying to remove the awkward atmosphere, Kai offered her another smile.

"By the way, it's so nice to meet another friend of Sunny's. What a surprise! I thought that he was a complete… uh… a solitary person. I'm sorry, but I didn't catch your name. Was it Neph?"

Looking at him, Sunny grinned. Then, he cleared his throat and said in a relaxed tone:

"Oh right, I forgot to introduce you. Sorry, my bad. Night, this is Nephis. Although these days she goes by another name. You might have heard it… meet Changing Star of the Immortal Flame clan."

…Now, it was Kai's turn to stare at Neph with horror. The corner of his eye twitched.

However, perhaps due to his idol training, he managed to hide his emotions much faster. Blinking a few times, he lingered for a moment, and then said in his smooth, enchanting voice:

"Oh. It's… a pleasure to meet you, my lady. I have... have heard so much about you. It's an honor!"

Nephis turned away, trying to hide a hint of blush on her cheeks. Staring at the wall of the alley, she hesitated, then awkwardly said:

"So… uh... your friend is already here, Sunny. Can we go have a talk now?"

She glanced at him and added after a bit of hesitation:

"I have something important to discuss with you. It's… a matter of life and death."

Chapter-171: Tether

Sunny blinked a couple of times, digesting her words.

A matter of life and death… if Nephis used these words, the situation was indeed dire. She was not someone to throw words to the wind.

However, she was also not to be trusted. No matter how much Sunny wanted for things between them to go to the way they had been before, he knew that it was impossible. There was no way back for either of them.

Sunny knew the true face of Changing Star now. He had seen the endless force of her conviction. In the flaming white inferno of her soul, all things were reduced to ash. Human concepts like loyalty, mercy, and affection had no hope of escaping that annihilation.

No matter what bonds connected them, Sunny could not trust Nephis to put them above her boundless obsession. If push came to shove, she would sacrifice anything… or anyone… to achieve her goal. Including him.

At least that was what he believed.

What's more, despite the fact that she tried to hide it, Sunny could feel that Neph's demeanor toward him had changed as well. He couldn't tell how exactly, but there was something almost imperceptibly different about how she looked at him.

Once broken, trust was not easy to put back. Perhaps it was simply impossible.

And yet… despite all that, was he really capable of refusing her plea for help?

Sunny sighed and closed his eyes for a moment.

…No. No, he didn't think he was.

Even if things between them became strained, she was still one of the only two people he cared about in this world. The way he felt toward Neph was... was almost like a second Flaw.

No matter how much he wanted to, he just couldn't get rid of it.

Somewhere along the way, it had taken root in his soul. He had hoped that it will wither and die if they were apart, but instead, it just grew stronger. And now there was no escape from it.

Sunny could feel himself being pulled back into the mess of humanity once again. Damn it! This was exactly why he had been reluctant to return here. After suffering so much to leave it all behind, why would he ever want to abandon his peaceful, pleasant, delightful life of solitude?

'Curses!'

But he just couldn't refuse Neph.

…However, that didn't mean that he was going to become her compliant sidekick again.

Even if they were going to work together, they were going to do it on his terms.

'Focus! You came here to purchase Memories to feed for the Stone Saint!'

Changing Star was looking at him expectantly. Sunny tried to appear confident and casual as he said:

"We can have a talk, but not right now. I'll... come find you when I'm done with my business."

Whatever it was that she wanted to discuss, it could not be extremely urgent. After all, Nephis had no idea that he was going to return from the ruins today. If there was no time to waste, she would not be wasting it on him, logically.

Changing Star was silent for a few moments, her face indifferent. Then, finally, she answered in a flat tone:

"That is fine. You know where to go."

Sunny smiled.

"Oh, and if you don't mind, I'll bring Night with me."

Both of them stared at him with the same doubtful expression.

"You will?"

Turning to the charming young man, Sunny pretended to be surprised by his question.

"Don't you want to meet my other friends? They'll be able to answer all your stupid questions, for sure!"

Night hesitated.

"...I guess?"

"Wonderful!"

Sunny gave him a nod and glanced at Nephis, who was clearly wondering if her idol could really be trusted.

"It's decided then. Now, if you'll excuse us…"

Truth be told, he didn't trust the pretty archer that much either. But his ability to detect lies would come in incredibly handy during the conversation with Changing Star.

She was the one and only graduate of Sunny's school of deception and lies, after all.

Pushing Kai away, he waited until they were at an appropriate distance and asked:

"So what did you find out about the Memories?"

***

Soon enough, they were entering the Bright Castle. Sunny felt strange returning to this splendid, suffocating place. This time, he came as a guest of a well-regarded resident, not as a slum dweller seeking to exchange a soul shard for a moment of respite from the cold, darkness, and terror. The Guards did glance at him with disdain, but remained passive.

Walking under the swinging skulls, they entered the familiar hall of beautiful colored glass windows. The opulent desk that Harper used to sit behind was still there, only now, a similarly downtrodden young woman was scribbling on a piece of parchment instead.

The world didn't care about the death of one little human. It just moved on, instantly replacing that which was lost.

Forgetting it.

Sunny grimaced.

"So, you did find me some Memories to buy? What are the prices?"

Kai smiled, gestured him to follow, and said:

"I did you one better. I actually managed to get us an invitation to the Memory Market."

Sunny frowned:

"A what? Never heard of it."

The charming young man gave him a nod.

"That's not surprising. It's a place where you can peruse various Memories and purchase them for an acceptable price. Uh… I say acceptable, but you know who has all the shards in this place. So, usually, they only let the members of the Host in."

Made sense. Gunlaug would never allow Memories to freely circulate among people who did not belong to him. The Guards and Hunters, though, needed a place to exchange Memories that didn't fit their Aspects for either shards or something that did.

"Then how did you get the invitation?"

Kai shrugged.

"It's not that hard if you have the shards. Problem is, very few of us free folk do."

To Sunny's surprise, they actually entered one of the forbidden areas of the castle. After walking down a few long corridors and going down several flights of stairs, a sturdy wooden door appeared before them.

There was a symbol of a sword and shield drawn on it.

Winking at him, Night opened the door and walked inside.

Sunny followed.

Once he saw the interior of the room, his eyes glistened with excitement.

Chapter-172: Memory Market

Behind the door, there was a medium-sized hall that had no windows. It was illuminated by a strange lantern that levitated in its center, radiating a bright and stable glow.

Along the walls of the room stood various weapon racks, wooden mannequins dressed in full suits of armor, and tables with a wide assortment of beautiful and intriguing objects placed upon them.

All of it — the weapons, the armors, the objects, even the levitating lantern — were Memories.

Sunny felt a thundering thought explode in his mind. For a few moments, he was only able to think about one thing:

'Money! That is so much money!'

Inside this unassuming hall hid a fortune that could rival that of an entire corporation.

He was barely stopping himself from drooling.

"Uh… Sunny?"

Brought back from his covetous stupor, Sunny blinked a couple of times and glanced at Kai.

"Huh?"

The beautiful archer hesitated for a moment, then said:

"I was saying, this is Stev. He is in charge of this place."

Only now did Sunny notice that there was someone else in the room. It was a man that was old by the standards of the Dark City, nearing twenty-five or so. He had a round face and cheerful eyes, which were

currently full of doubt and hints of disgust.

His gaze, of course, was aimed at Sunny.

'Have you looked in the mirror, bastard?!'

Apart from his extremely tall stature, there was one other special thing about Stev's appearance, and it was that he was… fat. He was the first obese person that Sunny had met in the Dark City. Having a belly like that in a place like this must have required a lot of work, talent and dedication.

He didn't know whether to be impressed or appalled.

In any case, Sunny decided to not get on Stev's bad side.

...He wouldn't want to get eaten by this ogre, after all!

"Uh… nice to meet you, Stev. I'm Sunny."

The ample giant looked down at him, then glanced at Kai, and said in a strange voice:

"Night, my dear friend. Are you sure this dirty vagrant is… a customer?"

Sunny frowned.

'Be civil… be civil…'

"Hey, fat bastard. Are you sure that this dirty vagrant won't break every bone in that fat blob you have for a body?"

In the dead silence, both Kai and Stev stared at him with wide eyes.

Then, Stev leaned back and let out a thunderous laugh.

"This little gremlin is a funny one, Night! Well, good. Very good! If there's one thing I lack in this cave, it's entertainment."

Chuckling, he shook his head and said:

"Still, my goods aren't cheap, my dear friend… uh… Sunny? A good

Memory will cost you a dozen shards, at least. Much more if you want something really useful. Are you sure you have the means to shop here in my emporium? How many shards can a slum rat like you have?"

Sunny blinked.

"I think there was a misunderstanding. Have you seen me? Do I look like someone who would ever be able to buy something from you? Of course not! I've never even absorbed a single soul shard, that should tell you how many of them I have."

Kai gave him a strange look.

Because of how confident Sunny had been while traversing the ruins, he must have assumed that his companion was sufficiently powerful. However, now he suddenly learned that Sunny had never absorbed any soul essence. With his ability to sense lies, the charming archer would know that it was the truth.

Well, of course it was. He absorbed plenty of shadow fragments, instead.

Sunny gave away that misleading secret on purpose. He didn't want Night to start questioning the amount of soul shards he was about to spend. Letting the archer think that he was too obsessed with wealth to expend any on increasing his power would, hopefully, lessen the impact a bit.

Meanwhile, Sunny shook his head.

"No, no. Kai here is the one who'll be handing you the shards. I'm just here to point him at the right ones. I have an eye for good Memories, you see."

By which he meant that his eyes were literally capable of peering into the very essence of Memories and discerning their true traits. But neither of them needed to know that.

Stev scratched the back of his head.

"Uh… well. In that case, take a look around. Ask me any questions if

something catches your eye."

Then he glanced at Night and scoffed.

"You could have just asked me for advice, you know? It's not like I can lie to you."

Kai smiled with embarrassment.

"Oh. Ah… yeah, sorry."

When Stev walked away, he leaned to Sunny and whispered:

"So the favor you wanted from me is to pretend to buy a Memory and then give it to you, so that no one knew that you have a hidden ace?"

Sunny stared at him. Actually, it was a good theory. Having a weapon or tool that no one knew about was a very good advantage.

Unfortunately, Kai didn't really know who he was dealing with.

Sunny shook his head.

"No. I don't want you to buy a Memory on my behalf."

Then, with an earnest smile, he added:

"I want you to buy around ten."

Kai's beautiful green eyes widened.

***

Leaving the charming archer struck dumb and speechless, Sunny walked away and started perusing the various Memories on display.

There were a lot of them. By his estimations, at least a hundred, if not more.

All sorts of weapons immediately attracted his attention.

There were straight swords, curved swords, estocs and rapiers, scimitars and sabres. Various daggers and knives called to him,

shining in the bright light on the enchanted lanterns. There were a dozen or so of polearms, from spears to glaives to halberds to naginatas. Several battle axes were displayed nearby. Further away, war hammers, maces, and flails radiated a silent feeling of crushing force.

A few bows received a dreamy look from Kai.

There were suits of armor, too. From leather to metal, light to heavy, scale to plate. Elegant, unrefined, graceful, barbarous… whatever a person could wish for. Some of them were shaped like actual armour, others looked like cloth garments.

Placed on tables, various objects begged for his attention. Gods only knew what enchantments they possessed…

Well, to be precise, gods and Stev.

And Sunny.

Walking among the Memories, he would periodically place his hand on them. Immediately, the inner weave of the Memory would be laid bare to his eyes, which were changed forever by the drop of Weaver's ichor.

Studying the logic of the weave, he was able to glimpse its purpose. Of course, there weren't any truly remarkable Memories in the hall. Who would want to sell something like that? However, even then, he managed to separate really good ones from simply acceptable, from borderline awful.

…That last category was what he came here for.

'Quantity over quality, remember?'

Sunny was almost done choosing the absolute worst Memories out of them all when his sight suddenly fell on a badly illuminated corner.

In that corner, covered in a thick layer of dust, stood a seemingly discarded suit of armor.

…When Sunny saw it, his hands slightly trembled.

Chapter-173: Black Armor

For a moment, Sunny froze. However, a second later he continued to behave just like before, as if nothing had happened.

The first rule of haggling — never let the enemy see that you're interested in buying something. And Sunny was dead set on haggling until Stev's ears started to bleed today.

Pretending as though he had not noticed the dusty armor, he walked around a bit more, slowly approaching the corner where it was displayed. Judging by the neglect with which the armor was kept, the master of the Memory Market did not know its true value.

Sunny really wanted to keep it that way. Because, if he was right… that armor was much more valuable than anything else here.

He didn't know for sure, but suspected that it was nothing short of a true treasure.

Because he recognized it.

The suit of ancient plate armor was jet black in color, its design intricate and solemn. It radiated a feeling of dark resolve and stalwart, adamantine grace. All parts of it were perfectly fitted to one another, creating an almost seamless barrier of impenetrable steel.

…Or rather, stone.

Because the dusty armor was almost exactly the same as the one the Stone Saint was wearing.

Of course, there were some differences. For starters, this one was somehow more… impressive. It felt as though it had once belonged to a creature of higher status than the steadfast Shadow. While Shadow's armor was made out of dark granite, this one was cut out of

pure black onyx. Its glossy surface seemed to absorb and devour any light that fell on it.

And that was just in its dormant state. Once it was animated like that of the Stone Saint… who knew how fearsome it would become?

Why was this treasure gathering dust in a badly lit corner of the Memory Market?

Sunny frowned. Yes, he was most likely the only person in the Dark City who had seen the formidable living statues up close. But still, everything about the onyx armor screamed of how incredible of a Memory it was. What was it doing here, neglected and seemingly forgotten?

He had a lot of questions.

Finally, he managed to reach the armor without showing how interested in it he was. With a false expression of boredom on his face, Sunny raised a hand and absentmindedly put it on the jet black breastplate.

A moment later, his mask of boredom almost cracked. His pupils widened.

What he saw beneath the surface of the armor shocked him to the core. The weave of ethereal diamond strings inside it was… was on a completely another level from anything he had ever seen.

It was much more complex and vast than even that of the Puppeteer's Shroud. Which was not surprising, considering that there were no less than six glowing embers connecting it all together.

And those embers were much larger and brighter than those inside his current Memories.

Sunny gulped.

In front of him, covered in dust, was an Ascended Memory of the sixth tier. Something that only a Fallen Terror could leave behind.

'Jackpot.'

***

His glee, however, did not last long. Almost instantly, Sunny noticed that there was something wrong with the weave of the onyx armor. It was… damaged.

Thousands of strings were torn apart, leaving the whole pattern broken and full of disharmony. Instead of flowing seamlessly, they floated in the darkness, untethered from each other and the nexuses. The whole thing was a mess.

That's why he couldn't feel any logic or purpose in the weave. It was simply not there anymore.

Sunny frowned.

How could a Memory stay damaged beyond repair? That didn't make any sense. Memories were supposed to repair themselves inside the Soul Sea as long as they were not completely destroyed. This rule was pretty much universal. It couldn't be broken.

Unless…

A seed of understanding appeared in his mind.

However, before Sunny could elaborate on his idea, Stev chuckled and put a giant hand on his shoulder.

"What an awesome armor, right, my dear friend Sunny?"

Saying that, he leaned forward and laughed.

Throughout Sunny's exploration of the Memory Market, Stev had approached him several times to describe the most alluring qualities of his wares or simply to chat. He was obviously bored out of his mind in this windowless hall.

Sunny stared at him and blinked a couple of times.

'If you only knew what kind of a priceless treasure this is, fool!'

"Of all the pieces of crap in this market of yours, this one is by far the

most outrageous. I can hardly believe that you had the audacity to show it to people."

By which he meant that it was genuinely the best Memory in this whole room, if not in the whole castle — except for Gunlaug's golden armor, of course.

However, if it sounded as though he was blaming Stev for being shameless and trying to sell people an utter piece of crap… well, he couldn't do anything about that, right?

Stev sighed.

"Usually, I would get into an argument and try to defend my inventory, but I can't really disagree this time. This armor, no matter how awesome it looks, is indeed absolutely useless. It has been here from long before I was put in charge of the market, actually. I even consider it to be a sort of mascot."

Sunny scratched the back of his head.

"How come no one ever bought it?"

He was pretty sure that he knew, but needed to hear what was Stev's explanation to glean how much the giant man understood.

Stev shrugged.

"Why would anyone buy it? Have you not noticed that it's made of stone? Like, actual stone? It's so heavy that not even Tessai can move under all the weight. Maybe an Awakened would be able to, but to us Sleepers, wearing this armor is pretty much like trying to walk around dressed in a mountain. And that stone is not that hard to break, too."

He looked at the onyx armor and sighed.

"Actually, this armor has quite a story. It once belonged to a member of the legendary cohort that conquered this Castle. Some even say that it belonged to the first Lord himself. Supposedly, it had an enchantment that made it much lighter back then."

He looked at the armor with doubt.

"But when they were fighting some ancient terror, maybe the Spire Messenger who lived here, the armor was seriously damaged. Something went very wrong, the enchantment was broken, and it turned into a piece of stone. It's so damaged that even the Spell can't make sense of it, simply describing it as unknown that, unknown this... "

Sunny had to force himself to not hold his breath.

The Stone Saint was, supposedly, created by one of the Unknown. It made sense that the armaments of her kind were, too.

Regardless, it didn't matter that much. He was now pretty sure that he knew why the onyx armor was remaining in its dormant form and couldn't repair itself.

It had to do with the difference between the Sleepers and the Awakened.

Once a Sleeper finished his trial by walking through a Gateway, they would take the final step to becoming a true Awakened. Their way of entering the Dream Realm would change, their Aspect would unlock a second Ability, and their core would evolve to the next rank.

There was a quantitative jump in power, but most of the difference came from the qualitative one...

Chapter-174: Shopping Spree

Just like Dreamers gained the ability to perceive and interact with Soul Cores, Awakened were able to interact with Soul Essence. By channeling it inside their bodies, they were able to utilize it more efficiently and achieve greater results.

The ability to channel soul essence was also vital to unlocking the full potential of higher rank Memories. Besides the general rarity of such Memories, there was another reason why Legacy clans did not just equip their scions with weapons of tremendous power and let them sail to the Gateway without meeting any resistance.

It was because Sleepers simply had no way to activate powerful enchantments. Even Gunlaug was mostly using his Transcendent armor just for its durability, with a single passive enchantment serving as a nice, but unimportant bonus. In the hand of an Awakened with the ability to channel soul essence into it, the golden armor would have been far more formidable.

Which is where the paradox that rendered the onyx armor unusable came into play.

From his experience dealing with the Stone Saint, Sunny knew that her armor, just like the strange creature itself, had a very special spellweave. It was, in essence, a living armament. Unlike most Memories that could function on their own, it was simply a piece of dead stone when the main enchantment wasn't active.

So, after the onyx armor was damaged, it had to be awoken with soul essence to assume its true form and repair itself. However, there was no human on the Forgotten Shore capable of channeling soul essence, and so it remanded broken, which in turn made it useless to all the humans here.

'What a shame… that I'll be able to buy it for a measly sum of soul

shards from these fools and feed it to my Shadow, ha!'

Sunny didn't really care whether the armor was intact or not. All he cared about was that it had six Ascended embers that his Stone Saint could devour. Maybe she'll even gain something extra because of her close affinity with the armor… after all, they came from the same source!

For a moment, Sunny considered the idea that his Shadow might refuse to destroy the Memory for the same reason… but then discarded it. She was just a Shadow, after all. His will was her will, right?

Now all that remained was to make the purchase…

Sunny scoffed.

"So it's, uh… just a decoration? How tacky."

Shaking his head, he threw one last glance at the onyx armor, forced himself to turn away, and continued to walk around the Memory Market.

Ten minutes later, he walked over to Kai and silently handed him the rucksack. Then, he named the Memories he wanted him to buy.

The charming young men blinked a couple of times, then said:

"Wait… you weren't joking? You really want to buy t—ten Memories?"

Sunny frowned at him and hissed:

"Keep your voice down! We need people to think that you are the one buying them, remember?"

Kai hesitated, then massaged his temples.

"Sunny, my friend… don't take it the wrong way, but you do know how much Memories cost, right?"

Instead of answering, Sunny gestured to the rucksack.

"Open it, you idiot."

The archer sighed and opened the clasp of the rucksack.

Then, he almost dropped it.

Inside the crude backpack, dozens of soul shards were softly glowing in the dark. There were around seventy of them in there, at least.

Kai's hands trembled. Raising his head, he stared at Sunny with wide eyes and whispered with horror:

"S—Sunny! Where did you get all these shards?!"

Seventy shards was more than most of the people in the Dark City would see in their lifetime. The contents of the unassuming rucksack were enough to start a chain of bloody conflicts that could culminate in a small war.

Sunny stared at him and shrugged.

"What do you mean? They were just gathering dust in my bedroom. I would bring more, but the rest wouldn't fit in the rucksack."

Kai looked as though he was on the verge of fainting. Then, he blushed in embarrassment.

'Ah, I bet he's remembering how he was bragging about being rich and tried to bribe me with a promise of ten whole shards, which, in his words, was a small fortune. Ha!'

While Sunny was silently gloating, a sudden shadow ran over the beautiful archer's face. In a small voice, he said:

"Wait, Sunny. Did you say "bedroom"?"

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"Sure. Why?"

Kai shut his eyes.

"So you actually live in that cathedral?"

There was no point in denying it anymore, really.

"That's right."

Looking at Sunny with a pleading expression, the charming young man asked:

"Then what about the Fallen Devil? Is there really a Fallen Devil in that cathedral?"

Sunny looked at him with confusion.

"That bastard? Yup, he's there. What about him?"

A shaky breath escaped from Kai's mouth. Looking weak and defeated, he shook his head, opened his mouth, then closed it again and simply stared at a wall for some time.

He had the look of a man who suddenly realized that nothing in the world made sense anymore.

When Kai finally regained his ability to speak, his enchanting voice sounded strangely listless.

"I'll… I'll go buy the Memories, I guess."

Sunny offered him a bright smile.

"That'd be great! Thanks!"

Shaking his head, the archer called Stev over and slowly listed the Memories that Sunny told him to buy — including the damaged onyx armor.

With each next one he named, Stev's expression grew weirder and weirder. By the end, he was almost green.

"...Uh. Night, buddy. I really don't want to offend our friend Sunny and your choice of advisers… but you literally chose the ten worst Memories I have in the inventory, by far! If it was anyone else, I would have been ecstatic to get rid of them. But… but… I simply can't do this to you! Please, reconsider!"

Kai glanced at Sunny, asking what to do. It seemed that he didn't want to see his new friend make a terrible mistake.

Sunny smiled.

"Worst, you say? You said it yourself, right? Everyone heard that? I guess you'll give us a big discount then!"

Stev stared at him with a bizarre expression on his face. Then, he said:

"I don't think you understand. When I say worst, what I mean is that they're… trash! Complete trash! You do understand what trash means, right?"

Sunny shrugged.

"Well, you know what they say. One man's trash… is another man's breakfast. Wait, no. Another man's… uh… treasure? Yeah, treasure. That's right…"

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Some time later, in an empty corridor of the Bright Castle, Kai took Sunny by the hand. A moment later, several sparks of energy traveled between them.

Sunny tilted his head and listened to the silence. Soon, he heard the faintly familiar voice of the Spell whisper:

[You have received a Memory…]

[You have received a Memory…]

[You have received a Memory…]

After the tenth announcement, everything grew quiet again.

Sunny grinned. Just like that, he had gained ten Memories to feed to his Shadow. He even managed to purchase a tier-six Ascended armor for the laughable sum of seven soul shards.

What a bargain.

'Ah, it's good to be rich!'

However, soon the grin disappeared from his face. Instead, something dark glistened in his eyes.

It was time to have a talk with Nephis.

Chapter-175: Reunion

On the way out of the castle, Kai was strangely silent. Sunny didn't mind, because he had a lot to think about.

Going back to that lodge… there were a lot of things there that he had hoped to never see, feel, or experience again. For a moment, he even thought about rushing straight back to his cathedral without making good on his promise.

But why should he? It's not like he asked to be invited back. Nephis was the one who wanted his help with something.

'Just pretend like you don't care. Also, demand to be compensated for whatever it is they want you to do. You're an outsider now, and your services won't be cheap.'

Yeah, that was the best option. He wasn't going to agree to anything that didn't serve his own selfish interests. And there were a lot of things that Changing Star, with her thriving hunting party and following, could provide him with.

There was this one thing in particular, something he really wanted to do, but couldn't on his own. Maybe they would be able to help him with that...

As they were approaching the lodge, Kai suddenly asked in a serious tone:

"Sunny… why did you want me to come with you, really?"

Sunny sighed. Glancing at the charming archer, he hesitated, then said:

"I want you to tell me if I'm being lied to."

Kai frowned.

"I thought that Lady Nephis was your friend. Why are you so wary of her?"

Sunny chuckled.

Was she a friend? Even he didn't know what exactly the two of them were to each other. Worse yet, he wasn't sure what they would become.

"She's the kind of friend you don't really want to lower your guard around."

He lingered for a moment, then added:

"There's also a guy called Caster. He's the one I especially don't trust."

The archer raised his eyebrows.

"I've heard only good things about Caster. Why him specifically?"

Sunny cast a sideways glance at him and scowled. To be honest, Caster hadn't really done anything to deserve his hostility. But there just was something about the proud Legacy that gave Sunny a familiar feeling.

He was too perfect. In Sunny's experience, only people with bad intentions were capable of appearing so flawless. Perhaps he was wrong, but the policy of always assuming the worst had too clean of a track record to be abandoned now.

"He just gives me the creeps."

Seemingly satisfied with this answer, Kai shrugged and followed Sunny into the lodge.

The headquarters of Changing Star's hunting party had changed a lot since his last visit. It had already looked pretty presentable back when he was a member, but now, the lodge was much more impressive.

The first thing that caught the eye was that it had grown much bigger. During the months of his absence, additional structures were built to expand it both horizontally and vertically. Now, it was by far the largest building in the outer settlement, almost starting to resemble a small town hall.

It was heavily fortified, too, especially from the side that faced the white road. A couple of lookouts were visible on the roof, observing the ruins below. They were wearing armor-type Memories and holding bows in their hands.

It was a far cry from how things were before.

Inside, a lot of people were busy with various tasks. Sunny froze for a moment, disoriented by all the activity. He almost felt as though he had somehow mistakenly returned to the castle.

The reason for it was not the neat and tastefully decorated interior, with warm carpets covering the stone floor and various tapestries hanging on the sturdy stone walls. No, the main difference was in how the people here comported themselves.

The rot of hopelessness was almost gone from their eyes, replaced with energy and vigor. Sunny frowned.

'Why hasn't Gunlaug put an end to all this yet?'

From everything that he saw, Nephis was almost asking to be destroyed. How was all of this possible?

His grim thoughts were disrupted by a young woman who greeted them with a smile.

"Welcome! Can I help you with something?"

Sunny stared at the smiling girl, trying to remember if he knew her. No one came to mind. Trying to remove the scowl from his face, he answered in a flat tone:

"Neph is expecting me."

The young woman blinked.

"Uh… sorry. Who is Neph?"

Sunny rolled his eyes.

"Sorry. Lady Nephis is expecting me. You know… Changing Star of the Immortal Flame Clan?"

The young woman's eyes widened.

"Oh! I see. Let me show you the way…"

Sunny wanted to retort that he knew the way, but truth be told, he wasn't sure that he did. With all the changes that happened to the lodge, he had no idea where things were.

On their way, they passed the tiny room that used to belong to him. Just as they were walking by, Sunny glanced inside and saw that it was now home to someone else.

In fact, he recognized a couple of things that the new owner left on the narrow cot. They were Caster's. A corner of his mouth curled upward.

'Figures.'

It seemed as though he was thoroughly replaced by the scion of the Han Li clan. Well, whatever. The cot was not very comfortable anyway, unlike his luxurious wide bed in the hidden chamber of the cathedral.

Finally, the young woman led them to the area that used to be the central hall of the old lodge. Now, it was separated from the rest of it by a thick wall, with a sturdy wooden door barring the way inside.

Sunny took a deep breath, then walked in.

He had imagined that moment a lot of times in the past.

…Granted, he never thought that his reunion with the cohort would happen in the presence of an unreasonably attractive, washed-out pop star. But still.

Inside the room, a wide window opened onto an eerily breathtaking view of the Dark City. On the wall beside it, a map of the ruins was littered with various markings that contained valuable information. They seemed to be much denser than before.

There was a large wooden table beside the window, around which stood seven makeshift chairs. Currently, only two were occupied.

Effie was sitting on one, her feet unceremoniously resting on the table. As always, she looked extremely comfortable and relaxed. On the chair next to her, a beautiful blind girl was cradling a cup in her delicate hands. It was Cassie.

Nephis and Caster stood near the map, discussing something with each other.

The four of them were the core of the Immortal Flame hunting party.

Once Sunny and Kai entered, everyone turned to them.

Sunny put on a brave face and forced out a grin.

"Oh, so many familiar faces. Hi, everyone. No need to say how much you missed me. Anyway, this is Kai. Kai, say hi to everyone — these are Cassie, Caster, and Effie. You already know Nephis."

Giving him a strange look, the charming archer smiled dazzlingly and said in his stupidly beautiful voice:

"Uh… hello. Lady Nephis, Cassie, Caster, huntress Athena… it's very nice to meet you."

Cassie giggled.

"Huh, you won't believe it guys, I thought I just heard Night from Nightingale say my name. Crazy, right?"

Kai blinked.

"Oh, sorry. I am Night from Nightingale, actually."

Effie leaned forward and extended one arm.

Cassie's face, meanwhile, grew deathly pale. An expression of utter terror appeared on it. Her hands trembled, and the cup she was holding fell from them.

Catching the cup just a moment before it hit the floor, Effie sighed and shook her head.

"Every time… this happens every time…"

Sunny furrowed his brow and glanced at the beautiful archer with disdain.

'Oh come on! Was that reaction really necessary?!'

Chapter-176: Coming Clean

The four people in the room reacted to his arrival differently.

Nephis seemed to be indifferent, as always. However, Sunny knew her well enough to notice a strange tension hiding in the depths of her calm grey eyes.

Caster greeted him with an amiable smile, but there was coldness hiding behind it. It seemed as though the handsome scion was not happy about this turn of events. Did he see him as a rival for Neph's attention, or was there more to it?

In any case, it was not Sunny's problem. He did not plan on returning to the cohort on a permanent basis. Caster could have all the attention to himself.

Effie looked at him with a genuine surprise.

"Doofus? You are actually alive?"

Sunny blinked and stared at her for a few moments, then said in an acrid tone:

"Sorry to disappoint."

She shook her head.

"No, no. Just… how the hell did you manage to survive three whole months in the ruins?"

He grinned.

"What can I say? I had a good teacher."

Since Effie was the one who taught him how to navigate the Dark City, that compliment was directed at her. However, the huntress

simply shook her head.

"No student of mine would be stupid enough to actually live in the ruins. Not to mention returning looking so… feral."

'Do I look feral?'

Sunny took a mental picture of himself. Ragged clothes, dirty hair, a crooked grin, a hint of madness burning in his eyes… no, he couldn't see anything wrong with how he looked. In fact, the thought he looked great.

With an offended frown, he glanced at Effie and said:

"Yeah? Well… you look like you've gained a little weight."

…In all the right places.

'Focus, fool!'

The huntress glared at him for a few moments, then laughed.

"A girl got to eat. But also… wanna die?"

And finally, there was Cassie.

Cassie seemed to have changed the most out of all of them. The changes were not instantly apparent, but to Sunny, who knew her so well, they were unmistakable.

The blind girl seemed more… mature? She looked older, somehow. It was as if there was an invisible weight pressing down on her, the kind that people usually accumulated with the flow of years. Her demeanor was calmer, more restrained. Almost… cold.

"Welcome back, Sunny. I'm so happy that you are alright."

Giving him a polite smile, she grew silent and turned away. This… wasn't exactly the kind of welcome he had expected from her. He had been sure that the blind girl would give him a hug, at least. That was how it always happened in his head.

'Maybe she is shy because of Kai.'

However, Sunny had a feeling that he already knew the true reason for her subdued attitude. He just didn't want to admit it.

It was the vision. That damn vision…

Chasing away the feeling of dread, he sat down on one of the chairs and offered another one to Kai.

"So… what did you guys want to discuss?"

Nephis and Caster exchanged glances. Before saying anything, Caster walked over to the door and closed it. After that, he summoned a Memory that looked like a bone flute and placed it on the table. Immediately, something in the room imperceptibly changed.

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"What is that thing?"

The handsome young man sat on a chair next to Changing Star and said:

"This Memory has an enchantment that creates a cone of silence. No one outside this room will be able to hear what we're talking about now."

Ah. This fact alone was already enough to tell Sunny that they were going to discuss something that had to do with the Bright Lord, Gunlaug himself. Suddenly, he felt an irrational desire to be anywhere else but in this brightly lit room. The wide window began to look very alluring.

He sighed.

"So, the Bright Lord is finally ready to obliterate you all? Can't say that I'm surprised. If anything, it's strange that he didn't make a move much earlier."

Effie giggled.

"Oh, did he ever…"

Nephis glanced at her, making the huntress fall silent, and turned to Sunny:

"You are right. The Bright Lord is indeed about to make a move. We have withstood his previous attacks, but they were just a rehearsal. A few provocations to test our strength. Now, he is ready to act in earnest. And that's why I need your help."

Sunny raised his eyebrow:

"How can a cockroach like me help the great and mighty Changing Star of the Immortal Flame clan?"

Effie gave him and Nephis a strange look, then cleared her throat.

"Don't take it to heart, princess, but I sort of agree with Sunny. What can this little imp… uh, no offense, Sunny… do that we can't? I mean, he is a decent scout, but…"

"Hey! Offense taken!"

Changing Star smiled, then looked at Sunny.

"Don't be misled by his act, Effie. Sunny might behave like a cowardly weakling, but in fact, he's the last person in the Dark City I would want to face in combat. He is far more dangerous than anyone thinks he is. Isn't it right, Sunny?"

The smile froze on his face. A few moments passed in silence, with everyone staring at him. Finally, Sunny sighed.

"Oh well. I guess the secret is out of the box. Surprise, everybody! I am actually not a weakling. Who could have thought?"

Then, he glared at Effie and added in a mocking tone:

"Oh. My mistake. Actually, everyone except for you already knew. It seems that you are…"

However, Neph interrupted him:

"That's why he was able to survive three months in the ruins, just like he had survived two in the Labyrinth. Sunny is an extremely formidable fighter."

'Wow. Is she trying to flatter me?'

"...He's just a bit of a devious asshole. But that's exactly what makes him so dangerous."

'...I guess not.'

Looking at Effie, Sunny shrugged and smirked.

"If you don't believe her, just ask Night."

Suddenly dragged into the conversation, Kai coughed, hesitated for a moment, and then said:

"Uh… yes, I can confirm. He is indeed a bit of an asshole."

Sunny's face twitched.

"Not that! Tell them how I saved you!"

The charming archer fluttered his eyelashes with an innocent look, then added:

"Oh, right. Indeed, Sunny saved me in the ruins last night. He is a very exceptional and resourceful individual."

Sunny glanced at Effie with triumph. He didn't really want to provoke the tall huntress any further… but she did call him a little imp…

"See, Night has known me for just one night, but even he was able to see how fearsome I am. You and I, on the other hand, had hunted together for an entire month. How come you're so dense?"

Whatever. It's not like he would be spending a lot of time with Effie. Let her boil with anger…

With a teasing smile on his lips, Sunny turned to Nephis and asked:

"Anyway, what exactly do you want me to do?"

Changing Star hesitated, then said:

"I want you to take Effie to your hideout in the ruins and keep her safe there for about a week."

Sunny blinked.

Oh, no.

'...I'm dead.'

Chapter-177: Cloak and Dagger

Sunny grew silent and tried very hard not to look at the huntress, who was glaring at him with murder in her eyes. Did he hear it right?

"Uh… excuse me? Keep her safe?"

Nephis gave him a nod, then hesitated for a few moments and sighed.

"I guess I owe you an explanation."

With a frown, she glanced at the map of the Dark City. Her gaze was fixed on the symbol of a tower drawn in its center with white paint.

The Bright Castle.

After a few moments, she said:

"You asked why Gunlaug hasn't killed us all yet. This is a good question. However, the answer is… complicated."

Changing Star turned her head and looked at Sunny.

"Partially, it is because I have not challenged him openly yet. I also haven't done anything to justify an intervention. Everything we have accomplished for the benefit of the outer settlement not only fell outside the purview of his reign over the castle, but also strengthened the human position on the Forgotten Shore overall. Officially, he has no grounds to accuse me."

Sunny scoffed.

"It's not like Gunlaug really needs justification. He only needs the pretense of one, and even then just barely."

Nephis slightly frowned.

"You are right. If he really wanted to escalate the situation and bring about an open conflict, he could have easily created a reason. Alternatively, he could have sent Harus under the cover of night to make me disappear without a trace. But he didn't. And… we are not entirely sure why."

Sunny blinked.

"You don't know?"

Glancing at Caster, Neph shook her head.

"There are several possible reasons. Perhaps he is uncertain if Harus will be able to dispose of me. Perhaps he is using the growing status of the outer settlement as a deterrent against his lieutenants' ambitions. Perhaps he is just confident and patient. Whatever the case, Gunlaug more or less tolerated our existence for these past four months."

Caster sighed and added:

"Of course, there were still challenges we had to overcome. If we weren't cautious in how we dealt with these provocations, things would have been very different."

Changing Star nodded.

"Indeed. There were several attempts to taunt us into confrontation already. Nothing too bloody, though. However… things seem to have changed. We received word from the castle that Gunlaug is going to act against us soon. This time, he is aiming at one of my companions.

The attack will be a serious one, and the target is Effie."

Sunny glanced at the unruly huntress and raised his eyebrows. He had a lot of questions.

"Why her?"

Caster clenched his fists.

"It could have been any of us, really, but Effie… despite all my

warnings… got into a rather vulgar argument with a bunch of Guards who came into the outer settlement for some entertainment. Coincidentally, some of these Guards went missing last night. No one knows what happened to them."

'...Oops.'

Sunny was pretty sure that he knew exactly what had happened to them, though. After all, he was the one who killed them.

…But Caster didn't need to know any of this.

"Actually, I might know something about that!" Kai suddenly said, smiling like an idiot.

'Who asked that fool to open his mouth?!'

He tried to make the archer shut up with a murderous stare, but it was already too late. Kai enthusiastically went on to describe how he was kidnapped, put in the well, and then rescued by a mysterious stranger — who turned out to be Sunny.

Luckily, he was under the impression that the kidnappers were all slaughtered by the Black Knight, not realizing that Sunny was the one who had lured them into the cathedral in the first place — after personally killing their leader.

If Kai knew the full truth, things might have turned rather awkward.

After he was done talking, Caster sighed.

"Thank you, this is a very valuable piece of information. Sadly, it doesn't change anything. Effie is still in danger. The Bright Lord is going to use her as a hostage and force Lady Nephis to challenge him. If she does, he will kill her. If she doesn't, Effie will die, and our reputation will be ruined.

Either way, he wins."

Sunny cast a sideways glance at Effie, who was still relaxed and seemingly undisturbed by the prospect of dying horribly in the dungeons of the Bright Castle. In fact, she was currently more

interested in fishing out a piece of meat that was stuck between her pearly teeth and not paying Caster any attention.

'What a lunatic.' Sunny thought with scorn, making his shadow shake its head at the irony of that statement.

Turning to Nephis and Caster, he asked:

"How do you know all this?"

In fact, this question was moot. He already had the idea. To receive information about Gunlaug's plans, they had to have a spy in the castle. More than that, given the nature of that information, it had to be someone of considerable rank. Perhaps even someone in the inner circle of the Bright Lord.

Was Neph… working with one of the lieutenants?

Sunny counted the number of chairs in the room. There were seven chairs, but only six people.

'Interesting…'

Caster hesitated, then reluctantly said:

"We have an… ally."

Sunny decided not to press the issue any further. Frankly, he didn't really want to know. There was just one last question he wanted to ask.

"I see. Well, there is this one thing that I don't really understand. You said to keep Effie safe for a week. What is going to change in a week? I doubt that Gunlaug will magically forget everything after a few days."

A heavy silence descended on the room. No one seemed to want to speak first.

After a few moments passed, Nephis finally broke the silence. Looking in the window, she leaned back and said in her usual even, indifferent tone:

"In a week, we will be ready to leave the city."

Sunny almost fell from his chair.

…That was not what he had expected to hear.

Chapter-178: Lost Expedition

Soon, another map was spread on the table. This one was drawn on a piece of crude parchment made out of monster hide, and much less detailed than the one hanging on the wall.

Well, that was understandable. Because the second map did not depict the Dark City, but the Forgotten Shore itself. Sunny stared at it in stunned silence.

…Yeah. Nephis had not wasted any time during these three months.

He had no idea how she had gathered all this information, but there was a lot more on the map than he could have ever imagined.

At the center of it, a straight black line depicted the Crimson Spire. The Labyrinth flowed from it, devouring the parchment like an ocean of blood. To the east, a small circle of black ink with a symbol of a white tower inside of it marked the Dark City.

The city was perched on the edge of another, much larger circle. It didn't take too much effort to recognize the cyclopean crater — after all, Sunny had traversed it on a rickety boat once, a lifetime ago. However, only now, looking at it in scale, did he finally realize just how giant the crater was, and how vast the Forgotten Shore itself appeared.

Back on Earth, it would have been as large as a continent.

The Dream Realm was indeed much bigger than their own planet, considering that just one of its numerous regions was this enormous.

There were other symbols on the map that he didn't recognize. However, several of them attracted his attention especially.

On the other side of the crater, almost exactly opposite the Dark City,

a symbol of a tree depicted the Ashen Barrow. Some distance to the east of it, on a straight line, there was a mark in the shape of a red cross.

Another red cross was drawn inside the crater just outside the eastern side of the Dark City. The third one was about a week's worth of traveling time to the north, near a symbol that looked like a grotesque, misshapen skull. The fourth one was halfway between the ruins and the Crimson Spire.

The fifth one lay to the south, about the same distance as the third, drawn atop the symbol of an arching bridge.

The last red cross was at the very edge of the parchment, far away to the south, beyond the Labyrinth. Near it, two symbols were drawn: one was a crown, and the other one was a question mark.

Sunny quickly realized what these crosses represented.

They were the giant statues of the seven forgotten heroes who had given the terrible oath to vanquish the darkness and created the Starlight Legion.

The one to the east of the Soul Devourer was the statue of the knight that he had used as a shelter on his first night in the Dream Realm. The one near the walls of the city belonged to the woman whose hand had saved them from drowning in the dark sea on the night of their escape.

The other four crosses, most likely, marked four more headless statues.

But where was the seventh?

Frowning, Sunny glanced at the map and said:

"So let me get this straight. You want to leave the Dark City, cross the Labyrinth, reach the edges of the Forgotten Shore… and then return?"

Nephis smiled.

"Pretty much, yes."

He sighed.

"If we somehow survive the months of traveling through the Labyrinth and actually manage to escape it, why the hell would we return?"

The smile on her face withered. Changing Star lingered for a few moments, then pointed to the three symbols at the lower edge of the map: the red cross, the question mark, and the crown.

"The first lord of the castle led an expedition to find the way out of the Forgotten Shore. This is where their trace disappeared. From what we were able to learn, an unassailable mountain chain blocks the path to the south. They ventured into the mountains… and never returned. Nothing but death awaits us there."

Sunny scratched the back of his head.

"So you aren't really looking for a way out… you're looking for the remains of the cohort of Sleepers that had conquered the castle fifteen years ago?"

Neph nodded.

"There is an item that they took away from the castle. If we find it… we'll have a chance in the fight against Gunlaug."

Sunny frowned. He felt as though she was not telling him everything. Maybe what little trust remained between them was not enough to share those secrets. Maybe she didn't want someone else in the room to hear them…

But then again, he didn't really care. Changing Star's business was her own. Sunny was just here as a potential mercenary. As long as the reward was worth it, he was ready to not ask any questions.

Provided that not knowing the answers was not going to get him killed, of course.

Feeling his hesitation, Nephis added:

"The way to the mountains is not as dangerous as you think. There

is… a method we can use to reach them comparatively safely. But once we're there... that's where we'll need your talents. Having you with us will make a lot of things easier."

Sunny looked at her with doubt:

"How do you know all this? It's not like there's anyone in the Dark City who was alive back then."

Nephis shrugged.

"There isn't, but there are stories. Some written evidence. However, most of this we have learned from Cassie's visions."

She gave the blind girl a warm look.

"Cassie has helped us a lot."

Sunny had to think. If Changing Star made this plan, it meant that she had good reasons to believe that it was doable. Of course, there would be danger. Nothing on the Forgotten Shore was ever safe or easy. But there was a rare opportunity in all of this, too.

He felt very tempted to leave the ruins for a few months in the company of an extremely formidable cohort. Outside the walls of the Dark City, Nightmare Creatures were generally of a lower rank than those inside. The efficiency of his hunting would be much higher, which would land him more shadow fragments and Memories to feed to the Stone Saint.

Especially if powerhouses like Nephis, Effie, and Caster were fighting alongside him. But more importantly, if Cassie was there to warn them of the dangers that they had no business trying to fight.

He never forgot how many times her affinity to mysteries and revelations had saved their lives in the past. Like on that awful night when they had summoned a terrifying mimic from the depths of the dark sea.

With a true seer accompanying them, the most harrowing thing about the Labyrinth — the cursed black waters — were not as unknowable and thus deadly anymore.

So he was not immediately against the idea, more so because he would be additionally compensated for the efforts.

But… there was something else that he had to consider.

Looking up, Sunny glanced at the people gathered in the room and cleared his throat.

"Uh… I would like to talk to Nephis alone. Please."

Most of them just stared at him without moving. Caster, especially, did not seem happy about the prospect.

'What is it about him and Neph? Why is he so… possessive?'

But after Changing Star gave them a look, they reluctantly stood up and left the room one after another.

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Soon, Sunny and Nephis were left alone.

He hesitated for a long time before finally speaking. His voice was raw and hoarse:

"Neph… why are you doing this? Why are you trying to pull me back? Don't you know how this all will end?"

She watched him silently for a while with an inexorable expression. Then, she simply said:

"Because there's only two people I trust in this world, Sunny. One is Cassie. The other one is you. I only trust you to have my back."

He couldn't help but laugh bitterly.

"Have your back? Neph, you know what awaits the two of us in the future. This story won't have a happy ending. There'll be only... only sorrow, pain, and rage. Remember?"

Changing Star lingered for a few moments. Her face was calm and firm. When the silence became almost overwhelming, she finally

answered:

"Life is not a story, Sunny. It only ends when you die."

He smiled crookedly, not knowing how to answer.

"So? Will you help me?"

Sunny sighed and stood up, glancing at the map of the Forgotten Shore one last time.

"I… don't know. I need some time to think. I'll take Effie and keep her safe for a week. You'll have the answer once we meet again."

She nodded, accepting that condition.

Turning around, Sunny forced himself to appear nonchalant and left.

As soon as the door closed behind him, his expression changed.

'Damn! I forgot to discuss my compensation!'

It would look really silly if he went back now… right?

Right?

The shadow palmed its face, once again lamenting the stupidity of its master.

Chapter-179: New Generation

Once outside, Sunny spent some time finding Effie and Kai. The two of them were in the dining area of the lodge, discussing something between themselves.

There was no sign of Cassie anywhere, but he did notice Caster observing him from the stairs leading to the second floor.

'Is she avoiding me?'

Somewhat disappointed, Sunny landed on a chair next to the two locals he had come to know and gave them a dark look.

"What, the two of you know each other?"

Kai smiled.

"Who doesn't know huntress Athena? We had, uh… a few brushes in the past."

Deciding not to inquire what type of brushes he was talking about, Sunny sighed and asked:

"Does she know about that peculiar Flaw of yours?"

The charming young man blinked a couple of times, the said with confusion:

"I guess so? I don't make a secret out of it."

Great. Of all the people in the world, he got stuck with two weirdos who had no qualms about telling every random stranger about their most hidden vulnerability.

…Well, if he had a Flaw like Kai's, he wouldn't worry about it too much either.

'Lucky bastard.'

Since there was no point in pretending anymore, Sunny simply asked:

"Well? Was anyone in that room lying?"

Effie grinned.

"Ah, so that's why you dragged Night along. Paranoid much?"

Sunny would love nothing more than to ignore that question, but unfortunately, his own Flaw was much more restrictive than Kai's.

"Not at all. In fact, I think that I'm exactly as paranoid as a person should be. By which I mean extremely, of course."

Saying that, he looked at the charming archer with expectation. Kai hesitated for a few moments.

"No, no one said a single lie. Your friends are all extremely honest people, Sunny."

'Oh, you poor lamb…'

Not knowing how to react to that display of naivete, Sunny shook his head and lowered his voice:

"Not even Caster?"

Kai gave him a nod.

"No, he was honest, too."

Was Sunny wrong? Was Caster really just an honest and honorable guy? Was his distrust irrational?

Somewhat unsure, Sunny lingered for a bit and then turned to Effie.

"Neph and I agreed to continue our conversation in a week. Until then, you'll be under my protection."

The huntress giggled.

"Wow. That makes me feel real safe. Thanks, shorty."

He grimaced.

"Don't you worry. I might not look like much, but wait till you see my roommate…"

Kai suddenly choked on his drink and paled a little. Reminded of something, Sunny patted him on the back and said:

"Anyway, thanks for your help. Our deal is done. See you around, I guess."

He was not going to miss this guy one bit. Sunny wasn't winning any prizes with his looks already, but next to Kai, he seemed downright ug… uh… barely above average.

The charming archer looked at him for a few moments, then forced out a smile:

"Yeah, it was nice to make your acquaintance, Sunny. I can honestly say that spending time with you is… uh… an unforgettable experience."

With that, he glanced at Effie with something that resembled pity, rose, and left.

The two of them were left alone.

The huntress looked around with a weary expression, and then asked in a neutral tone:

"So? When do we leave?"

Sunny didn't hesitate.

"Right now. Honestly, I can't wait to get back to the ruins. This place… it gives me the creeps."

Effie gave him a strange look, then shrugged.

"Sure, no problem. Let's ditch this scary place and go hide in the

ancient cursed ruins. At least we can feel safe there, right?"

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Some time later, they were carefully walking through the streets of the Dark City. Being here in daylight was not something Sunny was accustomed to, so he was justifiably tense.

Luckily, both of them were experienced hunters and worked well together. Sunny fell into the familiar rhythm of cooperating with Effie without skipping a beat, as though three whole months had not passed since they last saw each other. It was honestly nothing short of jolly.

At some point, the unruly huntress glanced at him and asked:

"But seriously. How did you survive, Sunny?"

He gave her a dark look, then shrugged.

"How do you think? You know that I am very good at hiding in the shadows. I slept during the day and hunted during the night. Observed my prey carefully before striking at their weak spots. If I ever met something I wasn't sure I could kill, I ran."

She became thoughtful for a while, then said:

"It's noticeable, you know. You've changed. You look… feel like a true hunter now."

Sunny grinned.

"Well, I would hope so. I hunted more Nightmare Creatures than was reasonable, really."

She smirked.

"How many?"

That was a good question. Sunny hesitated before answering:

"Around sixty? Yeah, no more than that, I think."

Together with those terrors he had slain in the Labyrinth, his kill count had long ago moved past a hundred.

Effie blinked and looked at him with a dark expression. That many hunts in only three months… the number was nothing short of staggering.

Actually, it was completely insane. Out in the real world, it was widely known that Awakened Nightmare Creatures were too tough for mere Sleepers to fight. Anyone who managed to prevail in a battle against one would earn themselves a proper reputation. Killing a dozen would make a person famous.

If Sunny were to return home and claim that he had slaughtered a hundred, most of them in a cursed ruin populated by Fallen abominations, the news of his accomplishment would fly around the whole planet in an instant. He would be hailed as an unparalleled genius and a hope of the entire generation.

…And yet, there were dozens of people just like him in the Dark City, many of them even more accomplished. Much more. Effie had several hundred hunts under her belt. There were a couple more hunters in the outer settlement whose track record was just as impressive… even if with the death of Jubei, their numbers had shrunk.

Inside the Bright Castle, there was Gunlaug himself, his five lieutenants, all the Pathfinders of the Host, more than a few experienced Hunters, and even a handful of Guards with a lot of battle scars to prove their prowess. All of them were at a level that Sleepers simply weren't supposed to ever achieve.

The Forgotten Shore was truly an... interesting place.

If Nephis were to somehow succeed and bring even just several of them back to the real world, how would the world change? Would other things that had been considered impossible before suddenly have their status put under scrutiny?

Was it the reason why the Spell gave her the name Changing Star? Was Neph destined to not only create change, but also be the catalyst of it?

Consumed with these thoughts, Sunny walked through the cursed ruins. Soon, a familiar shape of the cathedral appeared before his eyes.

Looking at it, Sunny shuddered.

He had been honest when he told Effie about how he managed to survive all this time.

However, he had failed to mention how close he came to dying in the process.

The memory of his first visit to the cathedral, and its consequences, was something he really liked to avoid…

Chapter-180: Break Point

It happened a few weeks after he left the castle behind. Back then, Sunny was just starting to feel confident in the absolute darkness of the cursed night. He stalked the ruins, searching for prey and slaying one monster after another.

Looking back, those few victories might have gone to his head a little. Or maybe he was just too sane to survive alone in the Dark City.

It was the first meeting with the Black Knight that caused him to lose that state of mind.

Sunny did not become interested in the ruined cathedral by accident, nor was he led there by empty curiosity. In fact, he had noticed something strange about the ancient temple and decided to explore it after careful consideration.

Because the thing he saw was too alluring to ignore.

At dawn, for a few short minutes, he could see a weak, ethereal golden glow emanating from the dark cathedral. The same golden glow he had seen twice before.

Once deep within the ruby droplets of his own blood after consuming the Drop of Ichor, and another time exuding from Changing Star's unconscious body after her battle with the horror of the depths.

Without having to guess, Sunny knew what this golden shine was.

It was the light of divinity.

With his own eyes altered by the drop of divine blood, which was left on the talons of the Vile Thieving Bird after it had stolen Weaver's eye, Sunny was somehow able to perceive it.

Considering that both Nephis and he possessed some measure of divine affinity, it wasn't hard to come to this conclusion. More than that, the circumstances surrounding the awakening of his ability to see the golden glow supported it.

Thus, hoping to find another treasure equal to the Drop of Ichor, Sunny entered the ruined cathedral. Then he froze for a second, awed by its grandeur.

That second was all it took for the Black Knight to skewer him on his sword.

Sunny didn't know how the massive devil managed to avoid being seen by his shadow, nor how he got so close without making any noise. All he knew was that a menacing black giant suddenly stepped forward from the darkness that enveloped the temple and pierced him with a wrathful gaze.

There were two scarlet flames burning in the impenetrable emptiness behind the visor of the knight's helmet. Looking at them, Sunny felt as though he was staring into the eyes of death itself.

However, even though Sunny was caught by surprise, his body moved on its own. Countless hours of practice did not go to waste.

In the end, it were the reflexes that Sunny had engraved into his muscles and bones that saved his life, even if only by a hair's breadth. Because of his quick reaction, the massive greatsword of the evil creature did not cut him in two.

Instead, it simply disemboweled him.

Feeling a blinding pain pierce his abdomen, Sunny staggered and looked down, only to see a river of blood flowing from his stomach, which was cut wide open. The red ropes of his intestines were clearly visible in the terrible wound, already on their way to falling out.

The horror of seeing something that should have been inside of him moving to the outside was much more powerful than the excruciating pain of his flesh being torn apart.

Pressing one hand against the wound, Sunny fell on his back and

weakly tried to crawl away. However, the Black Knight was already moving, raising his greatsword to deliver a finishing blow.

For a fraction of a second, everything froze. Sunny didn't have time to come up with an elaborate plan, nor even think things through. All he knew was that he had to buy himself a chance to crawl away… somehow.

Of all the Memories at his disposal, nothing seemed to be of use. Not the austere and razor-sharp Midnight Shard, not the ominous and powerful Puppeteer's Shroud. His mighty tier-five armor did not even slow the black blade for a moment.

Even augmented by the shadow, they were not a match for the terrifying devil of the ruined cathedral.

…In the end, Sunny simply thrust his hand forward and let a small and ordinary-looking rock fly from it into the depths of the ancient temple. His shadow wrapped itself around the little stone, enhancing its enchantments.

In the next moment, the rock suddenly howled, replicating the scream of the last Nightmare Creature that Sunny had killed. Augmented by the shadow, the howl shook the walls of the cathedral, causing dust to fly into the air.

The Black Knight stopped, then looked over his shoulder in the direction where the howl was coming from. He seemed to hesitate for a moment.

Not wasting any time, Sunny pressed tight onto his terrible wound, rose to his feet and staggered away, almost slipping in the puddle of his own blood. Groaning from pain, he tried to reach the exit of the old temple.

Miraculously, he did. The Black Knight stopped in the doorway, simply following the small figure of the mortally wounded human with the burning flames that served him as eyes.

Then, it indifferently turned away and slowly returned into the darkness.

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Some time later, Sunny found himself lying in a ditch somewhere in the depths of the Dark City. He had found his way to this ditch and crawled into it, hoping to hide himself from the monsters stalking the ruins at night.

He was consumed by pain, fear, and disbelief.

Was this… was this how it was all going to end?

Was this how he was going to die?

He wanted to cry for help, but knew that no one would come.

He wanted to simply cry, but, for some reason, nothing but laughter escaped from his lips.

Funny… it was just too damn funny!

An outskirt rat like him, dying in a ditch.

What a fitting end.

Why wouldn't he laugh?!

It was all just so hilarious.

A laughing fit sent him into an ocean of suffering. Every time he moved, it felt as though invisible blades were cutting into his abdomen, slicing his flesh apart.

And yet, he couldn't stop laughing.

The funniest thing of all was that he couldn't even die.

No matter how much he bled, his tenacious blood refused to give up. Guided by Blood Weave, it desperately tried to repair the damage done to his body. However, the damage was just too extensive. Even augmented by the shadow, the Blood Weave couldn't contend with it.

In the end, he was locked in an endless cycle of excruciating agony, not quite alive, but also unable to die... yet. Minute after minute,

hour after hour, nothing but pain and suffering drowned his consciousness, until something inside simply cracked.

Who wouldn't have gone mad?

Through the fog that clouded his mind, Sunny hazily realized that the sun had come up, then disappeared again. This happened a few times until he finally let out a quiet sigh.

Enough was enough. He couldn't take it anymore.

It was time to give up.

He had a good run, really.

But how could anyone endure all this?

He wanted to die.

He was ready… ready…

'Are you? Are you really ready?'

Sunny thought for a bit... and then suddenly bared his teeth.

Fuck no.

He was not ready.

Give up?

Never! Never! He was never going to give up!

He refused to give the world the satisfaction of devouring him. Not unless it choked to death on his soul.

'No, I'm not going to die… I'm going to live… I'm going to thrive… I'll be the last one standing, no matter what…'

With that thought, he summoned the Midnight Shard and gripped its hilt with the last bit of strength left in his body.

Memory Enchantments: [Unbroken].

Enchantment Description: [This blade refuses to be broken, and thus is durable beyond reason. It will greatly enhance the power of its wielder when they are close to death, however only if the wielder is unwilling to surrender.]

Responding to his vicious promise, the ancient blade finally opened the gate to the well of power hiding somewhere deep within his soul. Instantly, a torrent of energy filled his body with dark resolve.

The power given to Sunny by the Midnight Shard enhanced the healing factor of Blood Weave, allowing it to just barely keep him from slipping over the edge of death while it slowly began to repair his ravaged body. And as long as he was almost dead, the effect of Unbroken continued to feed Blood Weave with power, creating another cycle.

A virtuous cycle. A cycle of unbroken will to survive.

This was how Sunny was able to live through his first encounter with the Black Knight.

However, while his body eventually healed, the wound dealt to his mind remained. Days later, after Sunny finally crawled from that ditch, he was never quite the same.

And he never forgot the debt he owed to the Black Knight.

One day, he was going to kill the bastard, no matter the cost.

...And now, approaching the cathedral months later in the company of Effie, Sunny felt like that day was drawing closer.

Perhaps he really should agree to participate in Neph's expedition.

As long as she helps him repay that debt.

There was a lot to think about.

Effie's voice tore him away from these thoughts.

"Huh… Sunny? Are you alright?"

He shook off the harrowing memories, hesitated for a bit, and then smiled.

"Of course! Never been better. Here we are, by the way. Welcome to my humble palace."

The huntress looked at the grandiose cathedral with doubt.

"Here? You live here?"

Sunny remembered his First Nightmare and shrugged.

"What can I say? I have a weak spot for ancient temples…"

Chapter-181: Rules of Hospitality

Effie regarded the cathedral for some time, then glanced at Sunny with doubt.

"I know for a fact that nothing comes out alive from that temple. Are you sure that this is where you live?"

With a carefree smile, Sunny shrugged. The fact that Effie knew about the danger hiding inside the ruined church did not surprise him. Even if it was situated outside of her usual hunting grounds, she had extensive knowledge of the Dark City, some from her own exploration, some from sharing information with other hunters.

Dead tired and longing to return to the peaceful silence of his home, he didn't waste any time and told her about the Black Knight who guarded the cathedral.

The unruly huntress scratched the back of her head.

"So… there's a Fallen Devil inside? He's the roommate you were talking about?"

Sunny gave her a nod.

"The bastard endlessly patrols the ground floor and kills anything that comes through the doors. However, if we enter through the roof and stay hidden, we can reach my living quarters without any problem. More than that, nothing will bother us once we're there, because the bastard never comes that way and obliterates anything that tries."

Effie was silent for a while, then grinned.

"So, you basically have a devil for a butler. Pretty smart…"

Sunny chuckled.

'Was that a compliment?'

"...for a doofus like you."

'Ah, there it is.'

Once they climbed up to the roof, there was a slight problem. Sunny failed to consider that the hole in the tiles that he used to enter the cathedral, while wide enough for his small frame, would be too tight for the tall and robust huntress to crawl through. Looking at the narrow gap between the massive plates of dark marble, Effie gave him a gloomy look.

However, before Sunny could come up with an alternative plan, she simply bent down, grabbed one of the incredibly heavy plates, and moved it aside. The words died on his lips.

'S—strong. So strong. I wonder who is stronger, she or the Stone Saint.'

Honestly, he wasn't sure.

Before proceeding further, Sunny instructed Effie on how they were going to get her inside the hidden chamber and watched as the huntress reluctantly dismissed her bronze armor. With only a short white tunic covering her lovely olive skin and abundant figure, she looked very… uh… comely. For a moment, his displeasure of having someone intrude upon the secluded peacefulness of his lair evaporated.

…But only for a moment.

"Don't you get any strange ideas. Your armor is just too much of a risk. We can't allow ourselves to make any noise, that's all."

Effie grinned.

"Strange ideas? Why are you talking about having strange ideas all of

a sudden, huh Sunny?"

He gritted his teeth, turned away to hide his blushing face, and crawled into the hole between tiles.

'Damn woman!'

Once they landed on the support beam of the cathedral, Sunny guided Effie's hands to rest on his shoulders. Although the sun was still high in the sky, there wasn't any sunlight around them. Only the floor of the ancient temple beneath them was bathed in it.

But even then, large areas of the grand hall were drowned in deep shadow.

Only it wasn't really shadow. It was darkness. Not one born from the absence of light, but true darkness, one which even his sight could not pierce. Sunny didn't know if it was summoned here by the Black Knight or simply obeyed him, but this was how the bastard had managed to sneak up on him unnoticed back when they first met.

In any case, he had to guide Effie across the beams of the cathedral. One wrong step, and they would plunge to their deaths.

'What a bother.'

Feeling rather awkward because of how close their bodies were to each other, Sunny quietly sighed and took a step forward. It was hard to concentrate…

'Strange ideas… who's having strange ideas? Not me!'

A few minutes later, they reached the hidden balcony behind the statue of the unknown goddess. Despite the fact that nothing out of the ordinary had happened, Sunny was rather on edge.

Something told him that this was going to be a really long week.

Once they entered his hidden chamber, Sunny informed Effie that she was free to create light and speak. Not wasting any time, the unruly huntress summoned a radiant Memory and looked around with curiosity.

The beautiful and spacious room that had once belonged to the priestess of this ancient temple was suddenly flooded with soft light. The intricate engravings on the walls created an atmosphere of sanctity and elegance. Here and there stood various pieces of furniture, most made out of opulent pale wood, with a few mismatched pieces that Sunny had scavenged from the ruins.

Effie whistled.

"Have to give it to you, Sunny. You sure know how to live in style. Who would have thought?"

He smiled.

"Jealous?"

She sighed.

"The important thing is that even if Gunlaug tracks us here, none of his people would be able to enter. So we're indeed safe."

Slightly disappointed, Sunny shrugged.

"Well, make yourself at home. I'll show you the back exit and other stuff later."

With that, he furtively glanced around and tried to quickly hide a few things from sight to make his home more presentable. If he had known that there was going to be a guest here, he would have cleaned up the mess a little in advance.

Not that Effie paid it much attention. She walked around with curiosity, studying the engravings on the walls and ancient furniture.

…But then, suddenly, Sunny heard a loud giggle coming from behind.

Turning around, he saw Effie standing in front of the wardrobe hidden behind a stone panel. The wardrobe was currently open, showcasing the garments left behind by the priestess.

The huntress looked at him with a strange smile.

'Why… why is she staring at me?'

"What?"

Effie shook her head.

"No, nothing. It's just… you know, Sunny, when I first saw you, I thought — look at this tiny boy! He's just like a toy! You just want to dress him up like a doll and play with him…"

Sunny blinked a couple of times, then scowled angrily.

"Who are you calling tiny? I'm not tiny… in any way, you beanpole!"

Not paying him any attention, the huntress glanced at the wardrobe and giggled again.

Then, suppressing laughter, she said:

"Who knew that you are into… playing another kind of dress-up, huh?"

It took Sunny a couple of seconds to realize what she was implying. When he did, he turned bright red from outrage.

The nerve! The gall! How dare she!

"What are you talking about?! Those aren't mine! The priestess who lived here before left them behind!"

Effie nodded a couple of times.

"Sure, sure. You just happened to have a wardrobe full of pretty dresses. By accident…"

"That's the truth! I never lie!"

She looked at him with a wide smile.

"But of course! It must be the truth. I totally believe you. Definitely."

Sunny stared at her with his mouth wide open, not knowing what to say.

Effie, meanwhile, looked around and innocently fluttered her eyelashes.

"But, Sunny… we have another problem."

Gritting his teeth in irritation, he snapped:

"What is it?!"

She lingered for a few moments, then said teasingly:

"There's only one bed. Ah, what a predicament! Whatever should we do?"

Sunny glared at her for a long time, then spat:

"You take the damn bed! I'll sleep on the floor!"

With that, he turned away a tried to take a deep breath.

'Why did I ever agree to this?! Women… damn women… they're the true terror!'

…Indeed, this was going to be a very long week.

Chapter-182: Feeding the Monster

After Sunny calmed down a little and had time to think about it, he realized that things weren't as bad as he had thought.

Yes, living this close to the rambunctious huntress was a very special kind of trial, especially due to how much joy she seemed to derive from tormenting him, but there was one redeeming aspect to all of this… aside from the fact that he would get to constantly feast his eyes on… wait… back to the topic!

It was that Sunny was a nocturnal creature. He didn't have to sleep on the cold floor or interact with the vigorous huntress that much, because he would be asleep during the day and out hunting during the night. The window of time when they would both be awake and stuck in the hidden chamber together was not that large.

More than that, Effie had brought enough food to satiate her unnatural hunger in that bottomless bag of hers, so he didn't even have to feed her. So hosting her was not going to be as bothersome as he had initially assumed.

After showing the huntress around and enduring several more good-natured jabs, he finally had some time to himself.

Finally!

Sitting down in a remote corner of the chamber, he closed his eyes and dove into the Soul Sea.

As always, the tranquil sea met him with calming darkness and peaceful silence. Not paying any attention to motionless shadows that stood at the edge of the visible part of it… not even to gaunt and pitiful Harper… he walked over and stood beneath the black sun of

his Shadow Core.

Then, Sunny summoned the Stone Saint.

"Hey there, darling. Guess what? I brought dinner…"

Before commanding the Memories he had purchased with the help of Kai down, he quickly glanced at the runes surrounding the taciturn monster:

Shadow: Stone Saint.

Shadow Rank: Awakened.

Shadow Class: Monster.

Shadow Attributes: [Battle Master], [Stalwart], [Spark of Divinity].

Shadow Fragments: [6/200].

Only six fragments, and she was already so strong. He couldn't wait to see his monster grow even more ferocious.

Not wasting any more time, Sunny summoned the first Memory — a strange sword with a stupid amount of useless gems embedded into its blade, for some idiotic reason — and handed it to the Shadow. She took the sword without showing any emotion and ruthlessly shattered it with her gauntlets.

[Your Memory has been destroyed.]

Sunny made a face.

"Why thank you, Spell! I wouldn't have guessed if it weren't for you. So helpful."

Two torrents of ethereal sparks entered Stone Saint's body and were absorbed by the dark embers burning in the depths of the living shadow that hid in her body.

[Stone Saint has grown stronger.]

Was it just him or did the Spell sound a bit hurt?

'Well, tough. I didn't hear you complaining when Neph was promising to rip you to shreds.'

He grinned and glanced at the runes again.

Shadow Fragments: [7/200].

Satisfied, Sunny summoned the next Memory. The process repeated itself.

[...Stone Saint has grown stronger.]

[...Stone Saint has grown stronger.]

[...Stone Saint has grown stronger.]

As the number of shadow fragments saturating the core remnants inside his pet monster grew, his mood continued improving. This was the best feeling ever!

Shadow Fragments: [8/200]

Shadow Fragments: [10/200]

Shadow Fragments: [11/200]

Finally, after the ninth Memory was consumed, the runes describing the number changed to twenty out of two hundred. The Stone Saint looked considerably stronger already. Remembering the changes that happened to his own body after his first few kills, Sunny could more or less gauge how much her condition has improved.

The increment wasn't really that substantial… but in battle, the tiniest advantage could often decide everything. Especially considering that it was going to be doubled by the augmenting effect of his indispensable, but impudent shadow.

All of this was just a prelude, anyway. The main event was yet to come.

Full of anticipation, Sunny called the onyx armor down. If his calculations were correct, this relic alone should give the Stone Saint

twelve shadow fragments — almost as much as the nine lesser Memories Combined.

The jet black suit of ancient plate armor appeared in the air in front of him. Surrounded by the lightless vastness of the silent sea, the feeling of dark grace it emanated was even more pronounced. Sunny clicked his tongue.

'Ah, what a beauty.'

It was almost a shame to destroy it.

…Almost.

Slightly reluctant to part with the ancient armor yet, Sunny read the runes describing it.

Stev was right. Even the Spell couldn't make sense of the damaged Memory.

Memory: [M… Un…old].

Memory Rank: ?

Memory Tier: ?

Memory Type: unknown.

Memory Description: [...Pr… …first …army …shed …own…]

Memory Enchantments: —

Many of the runes were missing, and those that did appear refused to coalesce into any sort of comprehensible words. However, Sunny did notice a few of the strange runes that made his head hurt, the same ones present whenever the Spell mentioned the mysterious Unknown.

'Just as I thought.'

The armor was clearly connected to the same tribe of Nightmare Creatures that the Stone Saint had belonged to before becoming a Shadow. The origin of the strange living statues was tied to the

Unknown, so it was logical to assume that the onyx armor had something to do with them too.

Well, no matter. He knew that this Memory was severely damaged when he bought it. Sunny was never planning on using it, anyway, only feeding it to the Saint.

"Time for dessert!"

With a wide smile, he pushed the beautiful black armor to the stone monster.

However, the smile soon froze on his face.

Because the Stone Saint did not move to take and shatter the armor like she did with all the other Memories. Instead, she simply turned her head and looked at it. The hue of the crimson flames burning in her ruby eyes ever so slightly changed.

It was almost as though they were filled with the tiniest shadow of… sorrow.

"Come on! Eat it!"

But no matter how much he tried to get the Stone Saint to destroy the armor, she refused. The living statue just stood there and did nothing.

After a while, disappointed, Sunny stared at the onyx armor and sighed.

Well… serves him right. To be honest, he had a slight inkling that this would happen.

Nevertheless, Sunny had decided to buy the armor anyway. It's not every day that you stumble upon a tier-six Fallen Memory, even if it's damaged beyond your ability to repair.

Perhaps he would don it one day... if Nephis would actually manage to open the path to the Gateway and he would somehow find himself among those lucky few to reach it alive and become Awakened.

Until then, the awesome black armor was pretty much useless.

With a deep frown, he left the Soul Sea and summoned it into existence. Soon, the armor appeared on the floor of the hidden chamber.

Effie looked at it with interest:

"Wow. What is this?"

Sunny lingered for a long time, and then finally answered:

"A decoration… I guess."

The huntress raised her eyebrows.

"Really? Well, what are you staring at me for?"

He gritted his teeth.

A few awkward moments later, Sunny said:

"Uh, can you help me move it? It's… too heavy for me to lift…"

Chapter-183: Learning New Tricks

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

With a rather unpleasant noise, the monster's head fell down. Sunny indifferently bent his arm and wiped the Midnight Shard on the sleeve of his armor, watching as the massive body slowly topple over.

Standing on the other side of it, the Stone Saint simply flourished her sword in and stopped it abruptly mid-swing, sending every drop of blood flying to the ground. Then, she just stood there absolutely still, pretending to be a statue.

Sunny sighed.

'That's a cool trick. I should learn it.'

Honestly, cleaning his blade on the Puppeteer's Shroud was not very fair to the tier-five armor. He felt guilty.

"Watch my back."

With the taciturn Shadow observing the surroundings, he summoned the Prowling Thorn and used it to recover the soul shards from the carcass.

This was the fourth Nightmare Creature Sunny had killed this night. With the help of the Stone Saint, his hunts became much easier than before. Not even mentioning the fact that the Shadow was as powerful as most of his marks, the mere fact that he had a partner to draw the enemy's attention away changed a lot of things.

Sunny was somewhat capable of, but preferred to avoid engaging in direct battle with these abominations. His way of doing things was to

strike from the shadows and, ideally, kill the enemy with a single strike. If everything went smoothly, the prey would never even see its killer.

Of course, such a hunting method required a lot of cunning, patience, and preparation. He had to observe the enemy for a long time to learn its behavior and weaknesses. The confrontation itself took just a few seconds, but only because days had been spent in advance to make that immediate resolution possible.

After hunting in that meticulous way for three months, Sunny felt strange simply overpowering the monsters with brute force. The combination of Stone Saint's indomitable defense and his swift blade was nothing short of miraculous.

It was almost like fighting side by side with Neph.

Almost…

With a sigh, Sunny threw the soul shards into his rucksack and stood up.

He was facing a problem that he had never expected to face. It was honestly rather bizarre.

He was running out of monsters to kill.

Awakened Nightmare Creatures weren't that abundant in the Dark City to begin with, let alone those whom he had already tracked, studied, and felt confident attacking. After tonight's massacre, pretty much every one of them was dead.

Sunny had cleaned the house.

But he was so much stronger now, so much more dangerous. With the help of the Stone Saint, maybe there was no need to be so cautious…

'No. This is how you get yourself killed.'

This was a dangerous mindset. Despite his recent growth, Sunny was still in no way the apex predator in the ruins. In fact, he was the

opposite of that. Of all the creatures stalking these streets, he was the weakest.

'Pride is the gravest of all sins. Next thing you know, you'll be trying to hunt the Fallen Ones.'

Sunny would perhaps survive a confrontation with a Fallen Beast… maybe… but actually defeating one was a whole other conversation. And if he had the misfortune to stumble on something of a higher class, his chances of making it out alive would not be very high.

He could start investigating one of the Awakened creatures that he knew of. Or simply go home.

However, something was bothering Sunny. There was this feeling in his head that he had a seed of an idea, but then got distracted and failed to fully form it.

'What was I thinking about just now?'

Whether or not to hunt again tonight… how powerful he had become with the help of the Shadow… how it was not very practical to wipe the blood with the sleeve of the Puppeteer's Shroud…

'Oh, right!'

Back when he saw the Stone Saint shake off the blood of her sword, he had thought that this would be a cool trick to learn. And at that moment, he got a feeling that he was onto something.

'I should learn it… I should learn it…'

Suddenly, Sunny's eyes became bright.

If he could learn this trick from the Stone Saint… what else would he be able to learn from her? This Shadow of his had an Attribute called [Battle Master], which apparently meant that she was proficient in all forms of combat.

Was there a better teacher for someone like him?

The answer was — no. With his technique stagnating because of the

lack of guidance, there was no one better than the masterful Stone Saint to learn from.

Suddenly excited, Sunny summoned the taciturn monster back into his shadow and headed home.

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By the time he returned to his hidden lair, Effie was already awake. Sitting on the bed, she was lazily staring at the ceiling and whistling a cheerful tune. Her long legs were somewhat covered by the blanket, but still… that white chiton of hers was way too revealing! Sunny had to be very careful to look the other way.

It was very hard...

"Oh, you're back. Good hunt?"

Instead of answering, Sunny walked over to his chest, glanced at the huntress with suspicion, and opened it.

Then, he poured the contents of his rucksack inside. Seven soul shards fell on the pile, which was sadly visibly diminished because of his recent expenses.

It was still nothing to scoff at, though.

Effie whistled.

"Seven? How many heads is that?"

Sunny closed the chest and sat on it.

"Four. Three monsters and one beast."

Effie blinked, a bit stunned.

"Three monsters? How did you manage to kill three monsters in one night?"

He hesitated, then sighed.

Trying to hide the existence of the Stone Saint would be very

bothersome, especially if he was going to venture on an expedition with Neph's cohort. Out there in the Labyrinth, chances were that none of them would be able to hold back to hide their aces.

That was if he was even going to agree to it, of course.

Anyway, there would be not much harm in revealing her now. Or rather, the benefits outweighed it.

"I'll show you. Just don't freak out."

Effie giggled.

"I'm pretty sure that nothing you're capable of showing can freak me out..."

Ignoring her teasing tone, Sunny glared at the huntress and summoned the Saint out of his Soul Sea.

Immediately, two crimson flames ignited in the depths of his shadow. A moment later, the menacing stone knight stepped from it on the floor of the hidden chamber and turned her head to Effie.

Effie recoiled.

"What… what the hell is that?!"

Chapter-184: Value of Humility

The mighty huntress stared at the Stone Saint, her hand hovering in the air, ready to grasp the shaft of the spear. Her beautiful hazel eyes were full of tension and dark anticipation.

The contrast between that fierce pose and the fact that she was still comfortably wrapped in a blanket was so funny that Sunny couldn't help but snicker.

"Gee, relax. Haven't you seen an Echo before?"

Effie blinked.

"That thing… is yours? Wait, you got an Echo?!"

He gave her a nod and gestured at the Stone Saint.

"Yes, I did. Meet Saint. Aint' she a beauty?"

The huntress stared at the taciturn creature, then scowled with outrage.

"You lucky bastard! You do know that I haven't even caught a sniff of an Echo after three years in this pit? How dare you get one before me, huh?"

Sunny laughed.

"Actually, this was my second Echo. The first one got killed in the Labyrinth."

Effie glared at him for a long time, then shook her head with an expression of utter dejection. Finally, she turned to the Shadow and studied her.

"Wait… is she what I think she is?"

Sunny nodded.

"Yeah."

The huntress stood up from the bed and, leaving the blanket behind, walked barefoot around the Stone Saint. She studied her from all angles and then said:

"How the hell did you manage to kill one of those things and survive?"

Sunny, who had found himself involuntary studying Effie from all angles as well, blinked a couple of times and shrugged.

"Actually, they got wiped out by a group of Fallen. It was an epic clash, to say the least. I just happened to be there in time to finish one off. And here we are."

Effie stared at the Shadow with admiration.

"What class is she?"

Sunny smiled.

"Awakened monster. But I watched her kill two Fallen Beasts, so… I'd say she's an elite among her peers. Anyway, you can see how it's not impossible to hunt three monsters in one night with her by my side. I studied them in advance, of course. That's why we were so fast in dealing with them."

The huntress crossed her arms, thought for a bit, then gave Sunny a strange look.

"Why are you showing her to me? With how paranoid you are, I'd expect you to keep such a treasure hidden."

He stood up, lingered for a moment, then said:

"With what I have planned, showing her to you is sort of a requirement."

Effie grew silent, then gave him a mischievous smile.

"Ah. Sorry to disappoint. Don't get me wrong, I'm up for all kinds of fun. But, Sunny… Nightmare Creatures is where I draw the line."

He frowned, not quite getting what she was talking about. Then, his eyes widened.

"What?! You… what kind of a degenerate are you?! Training! I wanted to use her for training!"

The unruly huntress blinked innocently.

"Training? Sunny, there's nothing wrong with being a bit inexperienced, at your age. In fact, it's quite charming! You don't need to resort to this kind of thing, you know…"

"Inexperienced?! Who are you calling inexperienced?! I'm plenty experienced! Wait… crap. What are we even talking about?!"

Dying from laughter, Effie left Sunny to fume with outrage and walked over to the makeshift kitchen while shaking her head. Soon, the tantalizing smell of roasting meat filled the air.

'...I'm going to kill her. Should I kill her? It's going to be pure self-defense, anyway. A week of this will be the death of me.'

With a sigh, he tried very hard to calm down. When his thoughts returned to their usual cadence, Sunny stood in front of the Stone Saint and slowly exhaled.

It was time to learn.

***

On his way back to the cathedral, Sunny had made a hard decision.

He decided not to augment his body with the power of the shadow during his practice with the Stone Saint.

Even though he knew that this was going to bring him a lot of pain in the future, he was adamant about his choice. There were several reasons why he wanted to face his pet monster with his own physical ability and nothing else.

The first and most simple reason was that Sunny knew that the shadow would not always be there when he needed it. Just like during the battle against the Spire Messenger, when it had been away scouting, circumstances in which he was going to have to rely on nothing but his own prowess were bound to happen.

Not to mention that it had been his own reflexes, and not the shadow, that saved him from being cut in halves by the Black Knight.

The second reason was less evident. It had to do with the existing hierarchy of power in the Dark City. At the very top, there were the Fallen. Beneath them, those creatures that were merely Awakened. And at the very bottom, Sleepers.

Any fight that a human could face in that cursed place was going to be against an overwhelming force. With time, Sunny had adjusted to this reality and was able, these days, to face the lower classes of the Awakened abominations on almost equal terms… with the help of the shadow. He was still weaker, but not by that much.

However, deep down he knew that, sooner or later, he would be forced to fight against Fallen enemies. And he was also almost sure that he would have to cross swords with humans that had saturated their cores to the brim with soul essence, and were thus much stronger than him.

For that reason, his experience hunting monsters who were not much stronger than his augmented self was actually an impediment. It dulled his edge and made him forget what it actually meant to struggle against an enemy who was leagues above him — the knowledge and mindset that he desperately needed to retain to have a chance of surviving the future.

He had to keep himself humble.

And lastly, there was one truth that he had learned during these six months on the Forgotten Shore, and it was that nothing was more beneficial to one's growth than fighting against a superior opponent — especially if that fight ended in your loss. One defeat taught a person more than a dozen victories against weaker enemies would.

The problem was that, in this cursed place, any defeat meant death. So Sunny actually had little experience losing to someone. From start to finish, he tasted loss only three times: once in a battle against the carapace centurion, once when he had faced Nephis under the branches of the Soul Tree, and once in this very cathedral, when the Black Knight's sword had sliced his stomach open.

Each of those defeats taught him more than anything else did.

…So, having the opportunity to fight with a monster who was much more powerful than him, and yet had no desire to kill him, was an extremely rare and precious opportunity.

That's why Sunny steeled himself and let the shadow rest on the floor while he faced the Stone Saint.

Taking a deep breath, he summoned the Midnight Shard, assumed a defensive stance, and looked the menacing stone knight right in the eyes.

"Attack me."

Not wasting even a second, she did just as she was told.

'Oh… crap!'

Chapter-185: Battle Master

The Shadow attacked with the vicious strength of a true monster. Knowing perfectly well that his strength was not enough to block her sword, Sunny desperately moved the Midnight Shard to deflect the strike to the side.

The countless hours of practice and hundreds of thousands of times he had repeated his katas had not been in vain: his body moved with lightning speed, placing the blade in the path of the Stone Saint's weapon at just the right angle. Feeling the impact reverberate in his bones, Sunny gasped from the pain and stood his ground.

Guided by the Midnight Shard, the Shadow's sword glided to the side and missed his body by a wide margin. However, before Sunny had time to congratulate himself, the Saint simply continued moving forward and slammed into him.

Being hit by her shield felt like crashing into a stone wall at high speed.

Flying back, Sunny impacted against an actual wall and rolled to the floor. A small yelp escaped from his lips.

Getting distracted from her food for a moment, Effie glanced at him and called:

"Sunny? You're alive?"

He weakly raised a hand and brought his thumb and index finger together in the shape of a circle.

"...Yeah."

The huntress smiled.

"Good! Don't die yet, alright? It's going to be really inconvenient for me to get out of here without your help."

Sunny gritted his teeth.

'...Is that all you care about?'

"I'll try."

Slowly rising to his feet, he staggered and had to lean on the wall for balance.

The Stone Saint returned to her spot and stood there indifferently, not paying any attention to his furious glare.

With a heavy sigh, Sunny walked back to stand in front of her, raised the Midnight Shard, and spat:

"Again."

***

Over the course of the next few days, Sunny often wondered if he had really gone mad. Otherwise, why would he willingly subject himself to this torture?

His life now consisted of only three things: spending time with Effie, practicing with the Stone Saint, and exploring the cursed ruins.

Out of the three, the time he was spending in the deadly maze of the Dark City was by far the least dreadful. He even found himself enjoying it a great deal.

Once you begin thinking about a cursed ancient ruin teeming with abominable creatures as a comforting place, you should really start thinking about your life choices...

And yet, Sunny knew that he was on the right track.

Painful as they were, his training sessions with the menacing Shadow had turned out to be even more advantageous than he imagined. Every bruise, every cut, every drop of blood that he spilled was

making him stronger.

After a long period of stagnation, his technique was finally improving again. And it was doing so with noticable speed.

The best thing about it was that he had not even scratched the surface of the immense didactic potential of the [Battle Master] Attribute. For someone like him, who had never received a formal education in combat, it was simply a boon.

It was a hidden treasure.

Back when he had observed the Shadow in the fight against a carapace centurion, he had noted her distinct battle style.

The taciturn creature fought with the firmness of stone, combining flawless defense with devastating offense. Each action was efficient and perfectly calculated, with blocks, dodges and deflections leading into deadly ripostes. It was solid, indomitable, and inevitable.

However, this was not the only battle style that the Stone Saint was perfectly proficient in. Rather, it was something that she used based on her current weapons and opponents. Back when her original fought against two harrowing Fallen Beasts, her style was reckless and brutal, disregarding any form of defense in favor of an endless onslaught of vicious attacks.

Although there were some foundational similarities between them, these two techniques were vastly different. It seemed as though she was able to switch between countless styles to suit the situation.

Sunny couldn't wish for a better sparring partner.

His own style — or rather, the kernel of one that had been given him by Nephis — was flowing and unpredictable. It focused on adaptability and making it impossible for the enemy to anticipate your next move. The more Sunny fought against the Stone Saint, the more he realized how extraordinary it actually was.

However, it didn't mean that this style couldn't be improved. In fact, Sunny suspected that it was actually designed with the intention of being able to incorporate various elements from other sources. If so,

it was a perfect foundational style to learn.

All of this made him wonder where this strange style had come from, and if Changing Star had taught him its basics for a reason.

In any case, he was determined to make sense of it, improve his mastery of the things he had already learned, and begin to incorporate elements of Stone Saint's stark technique into his own.

However, this was easier said than done.

At first, fighting against the menacing Shadow appeared to be almost impossible. Every time he gave her the command to attack, he would inevitably end up on the floor in mere moments, groaning and consumed with pain. His whole body was bruised black and hurting terribly. If not for the tenacious enhancement of the Blood Weave, Sunny did not know if he would have been able to continue.

Or at least continue at an acceptable rate. With its help, however, the speed of his recovery was considerably faster. It was almost inhuman. Because of that, he was able to train more intensely and for longer periods of time.

Just as he had expected, every defeat taught him something new. Losing to a superior opponent was the best way to improve, indeed. Back in the real world, many people were foolishly obsessed with their pride and lived for nothing but to achieve victories against others.

Not Sunny, though. He was perfectly content with losing time after time, as long as he continued to become stronger with each loss. The only person he wanted to defeat was the version of himself from the last fight, over and over again.

Just like that, he had slowly begun to put up at least some resistance to the Stone Saint. At first, he was happy with being able to deflect one attack. Then, two. Then, several.

Before too long, he stopped counting the number of attacks and started counting the number of seconds he remained on his feet. It was just a couple at first, then four or five, then a dozen. Finally, he

was able to fight with the menacing stone knight for vast amounts of time, sometimes even up to a minute.

Even Effie seemed to be impressed. She usually paid little attention to his training, but after some time, Sunny noticed her glancing in his direction more and more. At first, he thought that the unruly huntress simply enjoyed watching him suffer in his suffering, but then he realized that she was actually trying to learn from his mistakes, too.

Sunny didn't mind.

His movements slowly became more confident, purposeful, and precise. His body, while damaged and bruised, was brimming with strength and agility.

He was maturing.

It was then, when his spars with the Shadow turned less one-sided, that Sunny noticed something strange.

And when he did, everything changed.

Chapter-186: Eureka

It took Sunny a long time to perceive the anomaly for several reasons. To begin with, it was so subtle that it was almost impossible to notice. His whole mind was concentrated on the thoughts of battle technique and styles, and still, he only saw it by accident.

The second reason had to do with his decision to face the Stone Saint without the augmentation of his Aspect Ability. Because of it, the shadow had nothing to do. It returned to acting as a proper shadow and obediently repeated his every movement while he fought.

The last reason was Effie — or, more specifically, the fact that she had brought a source of light into the hidden lair, making the shadow actually visible.

Because of this unlikely combination of events, Sunny was able to see it.

He was in the middle of a fierce battle against the Stone Saint, sweat and blood trickling down his battered body. The clamor of swords clashing against each other permeated the chamber, drowning the raspy sound of his laborious breathing. Deflecting another blow, Sunny swiftly crouched and let the edge of the creature's shield whistle through the air above his head.

His rather clumsy attempt to imitate one of the Stone Saint's explosive ripostes was easily blocked, and the two of them continued the duel. This time, it lasted for an especially long time. Sunny was pretty sure that he had already withstood the oppressive assault of the monster for one and a half minutes.

If true, this was his personal best.

After countless spars like this, he would sometimes enter a special state of flow. In it, his mind was calm and clear, operating at a

tremendous speed. When Sunny entered this state, his attention became simultaneously sharp like a blade and strangely unfocused.

Normally, he would have to concentrate on specific details, like watching the enemy's footwork to predict where the next blow would come from. Sunny was even able to split his mind in two, with one part of it absorbing the information that came through his eyes, while the other was preoccupied with what the shadow saw.

In this way, he could either concentrate on two enemies at the same time or have a full view of his surroundings, so that no one could sneak up on him from behind.

However, with his attention not focused on anything, he was somehow capable of perceiving everything. Every detail, be it the enemy's footwork, the direction of their gaze, or the slight change in the environment simply became a part of the all-encompassing tapestry that he perceived as a whole.

Needless to say, this ability to see everything simultaneously and think with sufficient speed to act on it dramatically boosted his combat performance. It was consonant with and felt like a natural continuation of the strange sense of clarity that he had achieved after almost dying in the battle against his first carapace centurion.

...Right then, Sunny entered this state of flow once again. After a few more exchanges, he suddenly noticed that there was something strange about his shadow.

Instinctively, he paid it more attention while continuing to fight.

It was then that he realized that his shadow's movements, while almost exactly like his, were actually not the same.

There was a very slight, almost imperceptible difference.

But he could feel something vast and profound hiding in this tiny divergence.

Stunned, he slowed down and stared at the shadow.

'What… what did I just see?'

Sunny was so stunned, in fact, that for a moment he completely forgot where he was. In the next second, the rim of the Stone Saint's shield hit him in the chest, sending him flying at the wall once again.

Sunny crashed into the cold stones, fell to the floor, and weakly groaned.

'Ouch. That one hurt.'

However, he immediately forgot about the pain. Sitting up, Sunny stared at his shadow with wide eyes.

'This… this is…'

What did he see?

The shadow's movements, while exactly like his own, were also different. It was… it was…

As though a light ignited in his head… or rather, became drowned in shadows… Sunny suddenly had an epiphany. This revelation was so astonishing that he almost cried out loud.

The divergence between him and his shadow was not random, nor was it chaotic. It was consistent and harmonious, hinting at a deeper meaning. And that meaning was…

That his shadow had a battle style of its own.

Sunny only saw a glimpse of it through the slight discrepancy in their movements. If someone didn't know the shadow as well as he did, they would never notice anything. Even he only saw it by accident.

What he saw wasn't enough to discern anything about that battle style except for the fact that it existed. He was also able to sense its… essence. It was flowing and insidious, shapeless and everchanging, like the shadow itself.

This description was so close to its nature that Sunny felt it was safe to assume that the movements of the battle style were not something the shadow performed on purpose, but rather a manifestation of its innate quality.

Did… did his shadow have a battle art fused into its very being?

"...It is an invaluable helper," he whispered.

If this was true, then Sunny had just found the answer to the question that had been tormenting him for the last few days.

While the battle style entrusted to him by Nephis was versatile and deadly, and the technique of the Stone Saint was indomitable and oppressive, they were not his own. No matter how much he practiced them, he felt that there was something missing.

Individuality.

Only by creating a style of his own would Sunny be able to become equal to the best fighters out there. Until then, he would always be just an imitator.

Of course, creating a true battle style was not something that a novice like him was capable of doing. More than that, there was a difference between knowing that the mysterious shadow style existed and actually understanding what it was.

But still, still… it was a beginning. If he learned the secret hiding inside his shadow and combined it with the flowing adaptability of his current style, what would the result be?

Standing up, Sunny spat a mouthful of blood, wiped the sweat off his brow and walked over to his tormentor, the Stone Saint.

Raising the Midnight Shard, he gritted his teeth and said:

"Again!"

Soon, the clangor of swords resounded in the hidden chamber once more.

Only this time, Sunny paid close attention to his shadow…

Chapter-187: Trial of Strength

Trying to learn the secrets of the shadow was a very slow process. Sunny could only see glimpses of the mysterious battle style while fighting against the Stone Saint, and doing so usually required his full attention. As long as he wasn't fully concentrated on his opponent, their clashes ended in mere seconds, making so that there was nothing to observe.

But when he concentrated on the battle at hand, he couldn't really pay any attention to the shadow, which in turn eliminated the possibility of observing it. Finding the right balance between the two tasks was not easy, not to mention painful. Every time he failed, a new bruise appeared on his body.

And yet, there was progress. Although Sunny was still unable to peer into the depths of the battle art, he was slowly beginning to get a feel for it. His shadow was more treacherous, fluid, and malleable than he was. There was a hint of a graceful cadence to its movements that lacked in his.

It was as though it was performing a dance. A shadow dance.

Frustrated by the lack of a breakthrough, Sunny wanted to push himself harder, but had to stop himself. Even considering the tenacious effects of the Blood Weave, his training regimen had already brought his body to its limits. He needed to preserve its condition if he was going to join Nephis on her long expedition…

Unless he wanted to enter the Labyrinth while crippled with exhaustion and injuries, of course.

What Sunny failed to realize due to the lack of experience — and the fact that he had been mostly self-taught — was that this accomplishment had already made him an outlier as far as humans went. Most novices weren't even able to master the superficial aspects

of different battle styles, let alone recognize their fundamental traits for what they were.

They simply followed the rules without understanding them, regarding styles as something indubitable and rigid. Only the most experienced fighters had enough understanding of the essence of a battle art to attempt to manipulate it.

So he was already far ahead of the curve.

But since Sunny never had a proper mentor, he had no idea that he was trying to accomplish something that an average human would never be able to do. His only point of reference was Nephis, who was an absolute outlier herself.

If renowned masters of combat arts were to learn that a self-taught youth from the outskirts had managed to dismantle two incredibly complex battle styles into basic elements and assemble them together to better suit his tastes, while also trying to learn a third one from his shadow, they would be stunned.

However, Sunny just thought that he was unsuccessful and incredibly slow.

'Ugh! Maybe I'm just stupid…'

Picking himself up from the floor, Sunny sighed and wiped the sweat off his forehead. Then, he glanced at the Stone Saint and leaned on the wall.

"You're done for today?"

Effie was nearby, dying from boredom. Watching Sunny torture himself was her only way to entertain herself in this dark room.

Well, that and torturing him herself. Among other things.

'Whatever.'

He gave her a tired nod.

"Yeah, I think so. It's already dusk, so I'll probably rest for a bit and

go out."

The huntress narrowed her eyes.

"By the way, I wanted to ask. How do you even know what time of day it is? There's no windows here, and we can't hear the sea yet."

He glanced at her with a gloomy expression and reluctantly answered:

"The shadow of the Crimson Spire. I can feel it."

Effie blinked a couple of times, then shrugged.

"Ah, I see. Anyway, since you're done… can I have a turn with your girlfriend?"

Sunny gritted his teeth and answered without even thinking:

"She's not my girlfriend!"

Only then did he realize what Effie was asking. She had never shown interest in sparring with the Stone Saint before. Why now?

Not that it mattered.

"And no, you can't."

The huntress titled her head.

"What? Why?"

Sunny scoffed.

"Do I need to explain it? It's too dangerous! What if something happens to you?"

Effie giggled.

"So let me get this straight. You can train with her all day every day, but you think that, for me, she's too tough?"

He shook his head.

"Don't misunderstand. It's just that if something happens to me, the worst outcome is that I die. If something happens to you, however, I'm going to get killed by Nephis. The end result is the same, but one way is vastly better than the other. Get it?"

She crossed her arms.

"Oh, come on! I just want to see which one of us is stronger!"

Sunny scowled.

"No way. Don't even think about it."

Effie silently glared at him.

"I said no, okay? There's no way I'm letting you fight her!"

The huntress grinned.

"Ah, alright. That's not going to be a problem…"

***

A few minutes later, Sunny was staring at the scene in front of him in disbelief.

How did it come to this?

Leaning over the opulent wooden table stood Effie and the Stone Saint. The elbows of their right hands rested on the table, while their palms were pressed against each other.

The Shadow was taciturn and indifferent, while the huntress was full of enthusiasm.

They were… preparing to arm wrestle.

Effie glanced at him and grinned.

"Wanna bet who's going to win? If I overpower your girlfriend, you'll owe me a shard… no, ten shards!"

Sunny sighed.

"What if you lose?"

The unruly huntress winked at him.

"...You know what, I don't even want to know. I don't gamble, so forget about it."

Effie sighed.

"So boring. Anyway… let's do this!"

She gripped the Stone Saint's hand and prepared to wrestle.

"Let's go!"

Instantly, both the Shadow and huntress tried to bring the opponent's arm down. The table groaned, subjected to a crushing amount of pressure. For a moment, it seemed that the Stone Saint was on the losing side, but in the end, her hand only moved by a millimeter.

The monster stared at the young woman with her ruby eyes, her face hidden behind the visor of the helmet. There was no emotion in her gaze.

Effie's hazel eyes, on the contrary, were full of mirth. There was a relaxed smile frozen on her face.

However, Sunny could see that she was putting her all into this struggle. The lean muscles tautened under the olive skin of her back. Her whole body was like a loaded spring, brimming with strength and overwhelming power.

And yet, the Shadow's hand did not move.

It seemed as though neither of them could overpower the other.

'Huh. I wonder who will give up first…'

A second after second passed in silence, but nothing changed. Both Effie and the Stone Saint were persisting, not giving up even a tiny bit of ground. The amount of strength they were exerting to keep this volatile balance made Sunny sweat a little.

'They're both monsters!'

…In the end, the first one to give up was the table. Not able to withstand the pressure anymore, it simply… exploded.

Covering his face to protect it from the flying splinters, Sunny froze for a moment, then stared at the pile of tiny debris.

A feeling of deep sorrow and indignation pierced his heart.

'Oh… oh no! My table!'

Chapter-188: Of Heaven and Hell

Just like that, a week had passed. Miraculously, Sunny had survived.

Even more miraculously, he had somehow managed not to kill Effie... which was a big accomplishment in and of itself. In fact, by the end of it, their forced cohabitation had turned rather pleasant.

They were both solitary hunters, after all. There was an instinctive understanding between the two of them.

His overall combat skill and particularly comprehension of both his own battle style and that of the Stone Saint had improved by leaps and bounds. He felt faster, stronger, and better prepared to face the horrors of the Dream Realm.

Although he had yet to reach the same level of physical power that he had possessed before sacrificing a hundred shadow fragments to create the Shadow Saint, Sunny felt that the current him was far deadlier of an opponent.

Which was good, considering how fast the grim future was approaching.

...Currently, Sunny and Effie were sitting on the support beam of the main hall of the cathedral, looking down from the head-spinning height. Far below and away from them, the Black Knight walked through the patches of light and darkness, continuing his neverending patrol.

Effie scowled, then whispered:

"So this is the bastard?"

Sunny gave her a gloomy nod.

"Yeah. In the flesh… or whatever he has instead of it."

The unruly huntress gave him a long look.

"How the hell did you manage to live through a fight with that fiend?"

He grimaced.

"Barely. Also, calling it a fight is giving me too much credit. I just got myself gutted and crawled outside. He never leaves the cathedral, so I got away."

She shivered.

"Are you sure that he won't hear us?"

Sunny pointed down.

"As long as he doesn't walk past that column, and as long as we're not too loud and keep our voice down, we're safe. Trust me. I've been studying that bastard for two whole months."

Effie suddenly grinned.

"So… how loud are we talking about? Because I can promise to…"

Sunny rolled his eyes.

"Can you stop? We're in a temple, for gods' sake."

He didn't need to hear the end of the phrase to know that it was going to be highly suggestive and very inappropriate.

She quietly giggled.

"Fine, fine."

After a couple of minutes passed in silence, Sunny looked down and saw that the pale light of dawn was slowly turning brighter. It was almost time for the two of them to leave the cathedral.

He had yet to come to the final decision regarding Neph's request. Depending on his choice, he and Effie would, perhaps, never see each other again.

Sunny quietly sighed.

Then, turning to the huntress, he said:

"Hey, Effie. Can I ask you something?"

She looked at him with a silent question in her eyes and shrugged.

"Sure. Go ahead, doofus."

Sunny hesitated, feeling the somber mood of the situation. Then, looking away, he said:

"Tell me honestly… were you dropped on your head a lot when you were a kid?"

Effie blinked a couple of times, then suddenly pressed both hands against her mouth to suppress a laugh. In the process, she almost fell down from the support beam.

"Heavens, Sunny… do you want me to laugh out loud and get us both killed? What's up with that question? No, I was not."

He looked at her with a dubious expression.

"Then why are you so damn cheerful all the time? It's not normal. You're like a crazy person… and I know a thing or two about that, mind you!"

The huntress smiled.

"Ah. That."

Then, she shrugged.

"It's simple, really."

Sunny waited for the explanation, noticing an unfamiliar air of melancholy around the vigorous young woman. Her usual infectious

vitality somehow felt... lessened.

"It's because I don't think that this place is as bad as all of you seem to believe. Everyone in this dark city is convinced that this is hell."

She hesitated.

"But to me, it's a paradise."

Sunny glanced at her and frowned.

"How so?"

Effie sighed.

"You wouldn't understand. But for some of us, the real world was more of a hell than the Dream Realm."

Sunny turned away, thinking about his one life in the outskirts. The reason he was able to adapt so well to the ruthless terror of the Nightmare Spell was because, at its core, it wasn't that different from his own reality.

"Still. What kind of a paradise is this?"

A sad smile appeared on the young woman's face.

"The only kind we deserve, I guess."

Then, she looked at Sunny and asked:

"Say, Sunny. You're from the outskirts, right? So you didn't receive a lot of education, I bet?"

He shook his head.

She chuckled.

"Well, not like it would have changed anything. The schools are basically propaganda camps, anyway. They teach kids some useful stuff, but also turn them unable to ask questions and blind to the truth."

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"The truth?"

Effie gave him a nod.

"The truth that our world is dying. Well, not the world, really. Just the part of the ecosystem that we need to survive."

Something moved in his memory. A year or so before Sunny was born, a whole continent was lost because a Category-Five Gate had opened on its coast…

But the huntress quickly overturned his expectations:

"And I'm not talking about the Nightmare Spell. I'm talking about what we, humans, have done to our planet without anyone's help. There were more than ten billion people on Earth a couple of hundred years ago, did you know? But now, there's barely three. And half of them only have food and shelter because of us Awakened and the powers we possess. Which were given to us by the Spell."

She wasn't wrong. Sunny remembered the poisonous, acrid air of the outskirts. The inhuman conditions in the underground factory where his mother had worked. The towering barriers protecting the city from the deadly winds of the wasteland outside. He knew, of course, that the planet was not in a good shape, compared to the past.

But he never really thought about it that much. To him, this was simply how life always worked.

Effie shrugged.

"Who knows how many of us would still be alive without the Spell? I honestly don't know. But if you ask me… I think that one day in the future, more people will believe that this Realm is a paradise. Just like me."

On that ominous note, she stood up and stretched her whole body, making Sunny hurriedly look away.

'Damn... pure thoughts, Sunny!'

"Anyway, it's already morning. Time to meet up with Princess and the others. Let's go…"

***

Soon, they were standing in front of the cathedral. The morning sun was slowly crawling through the sky, washing the ancient city in its pale light. Sunny and Effie did not have to wait long before Nephis and her companions appeared from the ruins.

Sunny blinked.

There was Changing Star herself, Caster, Cassie… and Kai.

What the hell was he doing here?

Once the four Sleepers approached and greeted them, Sunny immediately stared at the beautiful young man.

"Night… uh… why are you here, buddy?"

The archer smiled.

"Ah! I'm very happy to see you too, Sunny, my friend. Lady Nephis has asked me to join her on this expedition, and after careful consideration, I have decided to agree."

Sunny blinked a couple of times.

"Alright, I know that I'm crazy, but when did you lose your mind too?"

Kai looked at him with a strange expression.

"Wait.. crazy? What do you mean, you're crazy?"

Sunny sighed.

"Don't worry about it. I'm not really crazy... that much."

Then, he turned to Neph.

"About your request. I'm ready to join the expedition, but on one

condition. I will not become a part of your cohort. Rather, you can provide sufficient compensation to acquire my services."

Nephis looked at him for a while, an inexorable expression on her face. Then, she said in an even tone:

"Do you have something in mind?"

Sunny grinned.

"As a matter of fact, I do. Behind us, you can see a magnificent ancient cathedral. Inside that cathedral lives a creature which is called the Black Knight. He's a Fallen Devil. In return for my help during the expedition, I want your help after it is concluded. Once we return…"

He paused for a moment, and then added:

"...I want you to help me kill him."

A dead silence fell on the small square. After a while, Caster finally spoke, an expression of subtle shock on his face:

"Sunny… did you perhaps misspeak? We are only Sleepers, after all. How are we supposed to kill that Black Knight of yours? A Nightmare Creature of his rank and class…"

Sunny's grin widened. Then, with an immense feeling of vindication, he looked at Caster and said:

"...It's just a fallen devil."

Chapter-189: Sunny's Brilliant Emporium

The expressions on the faces of Caster, Effie and Kai were simply priceless. Sunny had to stop himself from laughing out loud.

…His shadow, however, did not. Luckily, it had no vocal cords, so all it could do was hold its stomach and shudder silently.

'Hey, you! Behave yourself!'

Meanwhile, Nephis just looked at him. The corner of her mouth slightly curled upward.

After a while, Caster was finally able to answer:

"Just a fallen devil? Did you say j…"

However, Changing Star interrupted him. Glancing at the cathedral, she simply shrugged and said:

"This is acceptable."

Everyone became silent. They simply stared at Neph with bewildered expressions.

With some satisfaction, Sunny nodded and said:

"Don't be so quick to judge. We won't be going into that battle unprepared. I spent months studying the bastard. I know his every ability, every trick, and every weakness. More than that… if you can't even handle someone like him, how are you going to challenge Gunlaug? Isn't that what this expedition is all about?"

Actually, he debated for a long time whether he should demand that they attack the Black Knight now or after the expedition was over. In

the end, he decided that they were all too weak to face the devil… for now. But after months spent in the Labyrinth, things were bound to change.

There were more Nightmare Creatures out there, and most of them were not impossible to kill. By the end of the expedition, every member of the cohort was going to have much more soul essence in their cores than they had now. They would also have a wider arsenal of Memories at their disposal.

More importantly, they would have time to hone and perfect their teamwork. If they wanted to have a chance in a fight against the Black Knight, this was the most important part.

Nephis nodded.

"Sunny is right. It's not like it's impossible to kill a Fallen creature. In fact, both Gemma and Tessai had done so in the past, not to mention Gunlaug himself. It just takes a lot of preparation and a little bit of luck. By the end of this, we should be able to take on a single devil and win, provided that we learn its secrets in advance."

Sunny smiled.

"Exactly! Oh, right. Speaking of preparations…"

While everyone was looking at him with confusion… well, except Cassie, of course… he took the rucksack off his shoulders and placed it on the ground. Then, he opened it, revealing the soft shine of numerous soul shards.

"Welcome to Sunny's Brilliant Emporium! This here is around fifty soul shards, each of them of the Awakened rank. Since we will be venturing into the Labyrinth, I've decided to give you guys an opportunity to empower yourself a bit before facing the terrible dangers of that ghastly place. Of course, I'll give you a family discount…"

He had emptied his treasure chest before leaving the hidden chamber. Currently, all of his remaining shards were inside the rucksack.

Of course, he hadn't done so out of the kindness of his heart.

Sunny never had any money and so, understandably, didn't know a lot about how to handle it. But one thing he did know was that rich folk never allowed their riches to sit idly. Even money had to work to create more money once it fell into the hands of the wealthy.

In the language of rich people, this was called an investment.

By investing his shards into the cohort, Sunny was increasing his own chances of making it back alive. No matter how hard he thought, he couldn't imagine a worthier cause.

Plus, he wasn't going to just give the shards away for free.

"The rules of the emporium are rather simple. You give me Memories, I give you shards. I don't care about how powerful or useful the Memories are. In fact, the worse, the better! Any useless junk you have gathering dust in your Soul Sea will do. If you don't have any — no problem.

You can just promise to give me a Memory in the future, once you receive one in the Labyrinth."

He smiled at the members of Neph's cohort.

"Not bad, right? No need to thank me, really…"

Kai stared at the shards, then raised his eyes and looked at Sunny:

"Sunny… buddy… please forgive my bluntness, but why do you need all these Memories?"

What a good question. Sunny grinned.

"Uh, you see… how should I put this? Let's just say that there's a beauty I know who just can't get enough of them. If you know what I mean..."

Saying that, he winked at the pretty archer. With a strange expression, Kai turned away and shook his head.

However, after this performance, no one else asked any questions.

In the end, Sunny was able to exchange his shards for five Memories. Nephis distributed the shards between the five members of the cohort, with each of them getting ten.

This was a boon equal to slaying ten awakened beasts. After absorbing the shards, all five of them were going to receive a significant boost to their power.

As far as deadly expeditions went, this was the best start possible.

Without wasting any time, Neph, Cassie, Effie, Kai and Caster absorbed the soul essence from the shards.

While they were busy doing that, Sunny silently dove into the Soul Sea and fed the Memories he had received to the Stone Saint.

[...Stone Saint has grown stronger.]

[...Stone Saint has grown stronger.]

[...Stone Saint has grown stronger.]

Satisfied, he summoned the runes and glanced at them.

Shadow: Stone Saint.

Shadow Fragments: [27/200].

Then, he looked at his own.

Name: Sunless.

True Name: Lost from Light.

Rank: Dreamer.

Shadow Core: Dormant.

Shadow Fragments: [318/1000].

…Not bad.

Looking south, he smiled darkly and wondered…

How much would these numbers increase by the time he returned to the Dark City? It had to be by a lot.

When everyone was done absorbing their shards and getting accustomed to the changes caused by the sudden influx of soul essence, the cohort was ready to move out.

The six of them headed south, cautiously traversing the cursed city.

Nephis was walking in the front of the party, her stark black and white plate armor contrasted sharply against the grey stones of the ancient ruins. A step behind her and to the right was Caster, clad in a polished scale mail that glistened in the morning light like the skin of a silver dragon. To her left was tall and powerful Effie, clad in the archaic bronze armor with a white chiton beneath.

A few steps away, wearing his elegant lamellar armor made out of burnished brown leather, walked Kai. On his back, there was a quiver full of heavy arrows. Cassie was walking beside him, her light tunic and bright cloak just the same as before. However, now there was a sheath with a graceful rapier attached to her belt.

At the very back, with an unhappy expression on his face, was a pale young man with messy black hair and a ragged light armor made out of dark-grey fabric and black, lusterless leather. He was periodically lowering his gaze and grimacing, as though unaccustomed to being in the sun.

Of course, it was Sunny.

Their journey to the edges of the Forgotten Shore had begun.

Chapter-190: Point of No Return

Sunny was walking at the back of the cohort, but his shadow was scouting ahead. Without it by his side, he was rather uncomfortable.

'I wonder if I can summon the Stone Saint while it is away. How have I never thought to check it?'

Without both his shadow and his Shadow, Sunny felt almost naked. At least he had other people with him, including three powerhouses — Nephis, Caster, and Effie.

Come to think of it, he had never seen Kai in action. The beautiful archer didn't look like someone extremely dangerous, but Sunny wasn't deceived. Weak people did not survive on the Forgotten Shore for years, especially not if their Aspect Ability made them the perfect person to venture outside the Dark City.

With his unique Aspect Ability, Kai had to fight against the type of terrifying creatures that Sunny knew very little about, too — the flying abominations that lived in the clouds. Like the Spire Messengers.

'Scary.'

Speaking of Kai…

Sunny hastened his steps and caught up to the charming young man. Glancing at Cassie, who did not seem like she wanted to say anything to him, he frowned for a moment, and then turned to Nightingale:

"Hey there, Night. How's life?"

The archer looked at him with a friendly smile.

"Oh, hey. Good, I guess? I mean… the weather is nice."

Sunny blinked a couple of times. The weather was never nice on the Forgotten Shore. It was either too cold, too damp, or too hot. Honestly, he even missed the Black Mountain sometimes. At least it was consistent.

Not one to make polite talk, Sunny went straight to the question he really wanted to ask:

"So, really… what are you doing here?"

Kai glanced at him with a bit of confusion.

"What do you mean?"

Sunny sighed.

"From what you told me, your life in the castle was nothing short of peaceful. You have enough shards to stay there for a long time, everyone likes you, and even the Host treats you nicely because of how useful your Ability is. Why would you risk it all to go with us into the Labyrinth?"

The beautiful archer lingered for a bit.

"Ah. Well… actually, I landed in a bit of trouble. I think. The deaths of those Guards who locked me in the well are being used to frame Effie, are they not? Well, what if someone knows that I am connected to their disappearance? Won't I be in danger?"

Sunny thought about it for a bit, then reluctantly agreed.

"Makes sense. But won't the danger you will face in this expedition be much worse than the one you are escaping from?"

Kai smiled.

"It certainly will. But, Sunny… there is something else that you failed to consider."

Sunny frowned.

"What's that? Please… please don't tell me that you became one of

Neph's converts."

The charming young man chuckled.

"Converts? No, I don't think so. At least not in the way you think."

He was silent for a long time, then sighed.

"Actually, I don't think that many people see things clearly. But really, it's not that hard to understand."

Turning to Sunny with a somber expression on his usually carefree face, Kai suddenly asked:

"I came to the Forgotten Shore thirty-one months ago. Do you know how many of us reached the Dark City that year?"

Sunny shook his head.

The archer grimaced.

"Almost four hundred. And do you know how many are still alive? Less than two."

He was silent for a while.

"Which means that, in just two years, more than half of us perished. People die all the time in the Dark City, you see. The castle may seem safe, but actually, the Host is constantly bleeding people. Every week, a few hunters don't return from the hunt. Every couple of weeks, a Nightmare Creature attacks the walls and kills several Guards before they manage to drive it away or destroy it."

Kai sighed.

"But most often of all, something comes into the outer settlement and simply drags away people. That's not even mentioning those who die of hunger, desperation, or by another human's hand. Do you… do you see where I am going with this?"

Sunny scowled, a new understanding dawning on him. Seeing his expression, Kai looked away.

"Indeed. Every year, hundreds of people die in the Dark City. And every year, hundreds more come to take their place. But, Sunny… this year, there were only four. Not four hundred, but just four people."

How.. how had he not thought about it before? Sunny's eyes widened slightly.

Meanwhile, Kai continued:

"Which means that the Bright Castle never got the chance to recoup its losses. What happens if that Spell Cycle theory that people have is true and five months from now, when the winter solstice comes, the same thing repeats itself?"

He shook his head, a dark expression on his face.

"It means that a year from now, there will be maybe six hundred humans left in the Dark City. And two years from now… there will be only a dozen or two. It takes a lot of people to maintain the semblance of civilization we have going on here, Sunny. Once we pass the point of no return, it will all come crashing down."

The beautiful archer glanced at him and added in a heavy tone:

"Every non-combatant will die. Every fighter who is not powerful enough will die. Eventually, only a few strongest ones will be left. Am I strong enough to be among those few? I'm not sure. And even if I am, who would want to live in a situation like that."

He turned away and stared at Nephis, who was walking ahead of them.

"So no, Sunny, I am not a convert. But I will follow Lady Nephis to the edges of the Labyrinth and back, because it's better to die trying to do something than to live on hiding your head in the sand. Don't you think?"

Just like that, their conversation ended. Sunny walked on in silence, thinking about what Kai had said.

If the archer was right, then the future was, indeed, nothing short of

disturbing. Of course, no one knew for sure how many Sleepers were going to arrive here during the winter solstice. But now that he thought about it, Sunny felt that people who believed in the cyclic nature of the arrivals were almost right.

He also believed that there would not be hundreds of new faces arriving on the Forgotten Shore in five months.

However, while others expected that there would be a dozen, a few dozen after a year, and a hundred after that, he did not.

For some reason, Sunny felt that there won't be anyone else coming to the Dark City at all.

He felt that the three of them... and Caster… were the last people to ever be sent to this hell by the Spell.

'Gee. What's up with people today? First Effie and her doomsday talk, now this. I am already an extremely pessimistic person. I don't need anyone's help to feel terrible about the future…'

But as it turned out, he did need help. These two conversations had opened Sunny's eyes to a serious problem.

He was too shortsighted. He concentrated too much on the problems at hand and failed to see the bigger picture. Was it because both Effie and Kai had spent more time on the Forgotten Shore, or was it because he had simply not paid enough attention to the details?

Would things be different if he had?

Just as Sunny glanced at Nephis, Cassie suddenly turned her head in his direction.

Sunny frowned.

"What is it?"

'She has been ignoring me this whole time, but now she wants to talk? Huh.'

The blind girl hesitated for a moment, and then quietly said:

"...Something is following us."

Chapter-191: Pursuer

"Something is following us."

Sunny's frown deepened. Not wasting any time, he moved forward and caught up to Nephis, Caster, and Effie. The huntress glanced at him and slightly tensed.

"Did your shadow notice an enemy?"

The shadow was currently a few hundred meters ahead of the cohort, scouting for any signs of danger.

He shook his head.

"Cassie felt that we are being followed. I'm going to withdraw the shadow and send it back to take a look. Stay vigilant."

Effie gave him a nod. Of course, as the pathfinder of the party, she was always vigilant. He was just warning her so that she could adjust her approach.

The two of them were well accustomed to working together, so there was no need to waste words.

Sunny commanded the shadow to return and fell back to the rear of the party. Once there, he concentrated on the shadows that surrounded them, trying to feel if there was something there that could not be seen.

But there was nothing.

Ahead of him, the rest of the cohort was silently preparing for the worst. Not wishing to let the unknown pursuer know that they were ready to act, no one summoned their weapons yet. No one had even turned their head. However, Sunny could see from the tension in

their muscles that this peacefulness could explode into a storm of movement at any moment.

Changing Star and her hunting party did not earn their fearsome reputation by mistake.

Finally, the shadow was back. Not letting it rest even for a second, Sunny immediately sent it to observe the streets that they had just left. His perception was split between its vision and his own.

The feeling of vulnerability he experienced when the shadow was away heightened. Sunny sighed with grim resignation. The fact that he was at the back of the cohort and, as such, would be attacked first if anything happened did not help one bit.

'Calm down. You don't even know what is tracking the cohort.'

A few moments later, the shadow was safely hidden in the darkness of a ruined building, observing the crossroad that one would have to pass to follow them. Sunny continued walking, pretending to not know anything.

A few seconds passed in tense silence, then a few more.

'Where are you? What are you?'

Depending on the nature of the mysterious pursuer, their response would be different. If it was a Nightmare Creature, they would either have to fight it or try to throw it off their scent. However, if the creature turned out to be one of the truly horrifying existences that stalked the ancient ruins… then things would get really tricky.

There was also another possibility. And that was that they were not being pursued by a monster, but by humans instead. A team of Hunters might have been sent by Gunlaug to ambush Changing Star and her people.

If that was the case… honestly, Sunny didn't know what would happen. However, he was sure of their ability to withstand an attack from the Host, even if the enemy held a numerical advantage.

The others seemed to share the same thought.

After a few minutes passed, the shadow finally noticed movement. Someone was slowly walking in the middle of the street, not even trying to hide their presence. At first, Sunny thought that it was one of the revenants that populated the Dark City. The figure, while human in appearance, was strangely crooked, with a dark unadorned cloak hiding its limbs and features. But then…

Sunny suddenly felt cold fear grip his heart.

He recognized those glassy, lifeless eyes. The hideous pale face that terrified so many people.

…Harus. It was Harus. The murderous butcher who had torn Jubei apart with his bare hands, Gunalug's cruel executioner and hidden blade.

Walking through the cursed ruins with the same bored expression that he had in the grand hall of the Bright Castle on the day of Jubei's execution, Harus was following in their footsteps.

Gunlaug did not send dozens of Hunters to ambush Changing Star. Instead, he sent just one man.

Sunny shivered.

'Damn it. Why… why am I so afraid of that guy?'

But he knew why. It was because, deep down, he felt that they were alike. Harus was the personification of everything that Sunny was afraid to become.

Trying to shake off his fear, Sunny walked forward and glanced at Nephis. Then, he said in a raspy voice:

"It's that… that damn hunchback. He's following us."

A sudden tension permeated the air. Without having to look, Sunny knew that everyone's faces grew dark.

Harus was a mystery. No one knew what his Aspect Ability was, let alone his Flaw. All that was known about this terrifying man was that he was very powerful, and that not a single victim of his had

survived.

Neph frowned.

"Is he alone?"

Sunny nodded.

"Yeah."

To his right, Caster quietly scoffed.

"What is Gunlaug thinking, sending one man against us six?"

However, Neph did not share his disdain. Turning to her left, she glanced at Effie. There was a grim expression on her face.

"What do you think?"

The huntress hesitated for a few moments. Then, looking down from her considerable height, she simply said:

"I think we need to run."

Caster scowled.

"Run? Why? Surely, no matter how strong Harus is, we can take him down. None of us are weak, either. Even if we can't defeat him one on one…"

Effie shook her head.

"You don't get it, do you? We can't fight Harus. No one can. Many people have tried, and they're all dead now."

She gritted her teeth.

"He is a monster in human flesh, Caster. He is insanely powerful. But that's not even the problem. The problem is that no one knows his Aspect. All we know is that once Harus comes for you, you die."

She sighed.

"I've seen many people try to resist once they caught wind that Gunlaug is going to send Harus to get rid of them. Strong people, weak people. Some tried to fight him alone, others recruited fearsome allies. Come the next morning, all of them were dead. No matter how powerful they were or how many of them gathered to give him a fight, no one ever survived. All that was left was blood and corpses..."

Chapter-192: Lighthouse

As somber silence settled among the cohort, Effie grimaced.

"The weirdest part is, no one has even seen him come and go. Every time Harus was sent into the outer settlement, we only learned that people were dead in the morning. Doors, locks, and barricades can't seem to stop him, either. Once Harus is ordered to kill you, you just die. It is as though fate itself abandons you."

Caster frowned.

"So are you telling us that we stand no chance?"

The huntress shook her head.

"I'm saying that fighting him right now would be stupid. Not unless we learn how he is able to seemingly turn his victims… no matter how many of them there are… completely powerless."

With that, she glanced at Nephis, who lingered for a moment and then shook her head.

"Our friend in the castle doesn't know either."

Effie grinned.

"Ah, so that mysterious friend of yours is not omniscient after all. Well, in that case, my advice stands. We should run."

At that moment, Sunny finally spoke up:

"But, Effie… can we even run away from him?"

The smile disappeared from her face. Suddenly grim, she hesitated for a while, and then said:

"I know of a way. But… it's going to be dangerous. Very dangerous. However, I don't know how else to shake him off our trail. So you decide, princess."

Neph was silent for a bit, and then simply nodded.

"We will face Harus some other day. Right now, reaching the resting place of the first cohort is the priority."

The unruly huntress exhales, almost as if relieved. Then, she said:

"Then follow me. And prepare yourself…"

***

After that disturbing discussion, Effie changed their course slightly. Instead of moving straight south, they were now traversing the ancient city heading for its eastern border.

Sunny wasn't too familiar with this part of the ruins. During the past few months, he mostly stayed north of the Bright Castle, sometimes venturing northeast. He stayed away from the western areas because they were closer to the Crimson Spire, and had not explored much of the south because it was too far away from his cathedral.

The last time he had been here was on the day of the bloody fight against the Spire Messenger. Back then, they were headed for the ruins of the lighthouse that had once stood near the impregnable wall of the Dark City.

Not that he had a lot of time to observe the surroundings. Pretty much all of his attention was concentrated on Harus, who was following them like a hound.

He didn't like having to stare at the menacing hunchback at all.

'Why don't you go fight some Fallen creature and die, bastard?'

However, Harus seemed to know the ruins just as well as Effie. He somehow avoided the worst creatures on his path while never losing the scent of Changing Star's cohort. At one point, a lone Blood Fiend attacked him from the deep shadows of a dilapidated building.

Gunlaug's executioner simply raised a hand and shattered the skull of the Nightmare Creature with one lazy punch.

He didn't even blink.

'Big deal. I… I killed plenty of those, too.'

However, Sunny had to admit that he was deeply unnerved by the power of the murderous hunchback. Maybe because he couldn't get rid of the feeling that by the end of it all, only one of them would remain alive.

And he wasn't sure which one.

Soon, they were nearing the tall expanse of the city wall. Not too far away, the remnant of a giant tower lay broken on its side, stretching far away into the distance. The buildings that the tower had fallen on thousands of years ago were shattered and turned into dust.

The ancient lighthouse might have been proud and magnificent once. Perhaps it had even served as a symbol of the defiant will of the people of the ancient city, burning as a shining beacon in the eternal darkness of the cursed night. But it had fallen a long time ago… just like the people that built it.

At least its ruin remained. The ancient inhabitants of the Dark City had just vanished, not even leaving bones behind.

Sunny sighed.

"Where to now?"

Effie gestured at the massive ruin.

"Inside."

They were currently hiding in a collapsed building near the collapsed tower. This area was populated by an especially vile tribe of monsters, and attracting their attention would spell trouble for the entire cohort.

"Call your shadow back and keep it close. When we enter the

lighthouse, we will have to act quick."

Somewhat relieved, Sunny did just that. Not having to look at Harus anymore was a reason for celebration.

Staying low to the ground, the six of them dashed from their hiding spot to the broken lighthouse. Without wasting any time, they found a breach in its wall and climbed inside.

Effie summoned her radiant Memory, bathing the interior of the ruined tower in light. Due to the fact that it was currently lying on its side, they found themselves in a massive, echoing tunnel.

Looking around, Effie found her bearings and led them deeper into the tunnel, extreme tension apparent in her every move. While walking, she began to speak:

"Listen to me very carefully and do as I say. Once we're inside, don't separate from the group. Stay together and keep your weapons at hand. The place we're going to is full of Nightmare Creatures. They're not too strong, but they're… special."

She bit her lip.

"Don't even try to kill them. Just defend yourself and keep moving. If you stop, you'll most probably die. Same thing if you slow down and get yourself surrounded. But if we can preserve our formation… we might survive. I hope."

'You hope? What do you mean, you hope?!'

Before Sunny could voice his outrage, they reached their destination.

Right in front of him, the floor of the tunnel was broken, forming a narrow crevice. It was filled with darkness, leading deep down into the ground… and then deeper still. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't see what was at the bottom.

The huntress glanced at him.

"What are you waiting for, doofus? Jump!"

Sunny gulped.

"You want me to jump… into that?"

By his side, Kai sighed and looked down on his freshly cleaned, stylish armor. An expression of pure sadness appeared on his beautiful face.

"Oh, well. Here we go again…"

Chapter-193: The Catacombs

Without wasting any time, Nephis silently jumped into the crevice. Just before she did, white flames ignited in her eyes. The darkness swallowed her lithe figure whole, like the maw of some unknown creature.

'Damn it all.'

With a resentful expression on his face, Sunny stepped forward. However, before he could approach the crevice, Caster inadvertently blocked his path. A moment later, the proud Legacy was gone, too.

Sunny lingered for a moment and then looked back. He wanted to check if Cassie needed help going down, but he didn't have to worry. Kai was already gently holding her in his arms.

The charming archer softly rose into the air, hovered there for a second, and then glided into the darkness. Sunny blinked a couple of times and shook his head.

'Show-off…'

Effie soon followed the rest of the party, taking her radiant Memory with her. Left alone in the darkness, Sunny shivered, wrapped himself in the shadow, and jumped down.

He fell for a few seconds and then landed on hard stone, the impact sending a painful tremor through his bones. Standing up, Sunny found himself in a narrow tunnel. Its walls were made out of weathered stone, clearly put there by human hands. The rest of the cohort was already there, preparing for battle.

Nephis had summoned her silver longsword. Because the tunnel was not wide enough to freely use it, she was holding it with both hands — one armored gauntlet rested on the hilt, while the other was on

the blade itself, halfway to its tip.

Caster was wielding a sword, too. However, his was a graceful jian with beautiful patterns etched on its blade, with a triangular guard carved out of green jade. Sunny didn't know what was the tier of that Memory, but he knew that it was extremely powerful. He had seen it cut through flesh, bone, and steel alike.

Currently, the jian was emanating a ghostly green light.

Effie had summoned her large round shield, but chose to leave the ancient bronze spear in the Soul Sea. While she was skilled enough to make use of it even in this narrow space, the shield would be much more formidable, especially considering her herculean strength.

Kai looked rather gloomy. Casting a mournful look over his shoulder, on the fletching of his heavy arrows, he sighed and outstretched his hand. Instead of a bow, an elegant falcata appeared in it. The beautiful curve of its blade glinted, reflecting the light.

The last one to draw her weapon was Cassie. Unexpectedly, she unsheathed a slender rapier from the scabbard that was attached to her belt… and let go of it. To Sunny's surprise, the rapier did not fall to the ground, but rather stayed floating in the air, as if attached to the blind girl by an invisible string.

Then it rotated slightly and hovered in front of her… with its tip pointing straight at Sunny.

"Uh… what?"

Cassie smiled and turned her head to him.

"Ah, please forgive Quiet Dancer. She is shy around strangers."

Sunny scratched the back of his head. Sensing his confusion, Cassie explained:

"Dancer is an Echo and a partner of mine. We work well together."

As if answering her words, the rapier suddenly circled around the blind girl and returned to its... her?.. previous position. It was still

pointing at Sunny in a rather unfriendly way, though.

"Huh… alright."

Interrupting their conversation, Effie called out to him:

"Hey, Sunny. Now would be the perfect time to invite your girlfriend to join us."

The rest of the cohort stared at them with confused expressions.

Sunny gritted his teeth.

"How many times do I have to tell you, she's not my girlfriend!"

Noticing the weird stares that people were giving him, he sighed.

"Effie! Tell them!"

The huntress did not even continue to tease him. Just this fact alone told Sunny how dire their situation really was…

"Sunny also has an Echo, and a powerful one at that. Go on, summon her."

He did, and a moment later, the Stone Saint stepped into the tunnel out of his shadow. Her ruby eyes were burning with crimson flames from behind the visor of the helmet. The taciturn monster briefly glanced at the people gathered around it, and then indifferently turned away to peer into the darkness.

Just like that, their group of six had turned into a group of eight… well, if a moody flying rapier could be counted to be a member.

…Suddenly, a distant noise made everyone freeze for a moment. With a dark expression, Effie looked in the direction it came from and sighed.

"Right. We've wasted enough time already. Follow me… and be ready."

With that, she took a step forward and headed deeper into the tunnel.

Sunny followed, commanding the Stone Saint to stay close to Kai and Cassie.

After a while, something crunched under his foot. Looking down, he saw… a bone. A human bone.

"What is this place?"

The huntress glanced back, and then answered in a somber tone:

"The catacombs."

He frowned.

"Since when are there catacombs beneath the Dark City? Why have I never heard you mention them?"

Effie lingered before answering:

"The catacombs were always here. They span beneath the whole city, it's just that most of the tunnels had collapsed a long time ago. As to why hunters don't like to mention them… it's because very few are crazy enough to explore what little remains of the catacombs, and even fewer return to tell the tale."

Then, she added:

"No matter how powerful Harus is, a person can only survive here if they know their way around. And only a couple of us, outer settlement hunters, do. So we should be able to lose him."

Meanwhile, Sunny noticed more and more bones littering the ground. All of them looked like they had once belonged to humans.

'I don't like this.'

Looking up, he asked:

"Can we get back to that thing you said about how very few people manage to escape from here alive? Why is that?"

The huntress grimaced.

"That's because…"

However, before she was done speaking, something appeared out of the darkness and barred their way.

Sunny opened his eyes wide.

Right there in front of them, a corpse was standing on the edge between light and darkness, staring at the six humans with the black chasms of its empty eyes sockets.

…No, not really a corpse. A skeleton.

Defying all laws of logic and physics, a creature made of nothing but human bones suddenly lunged forward, baring its teeth in a hungry grin.

Chapter-194: Aching Bones

'How… how the hell is this thing even moving?'

Defying all logic, the skeleton lunged at Effie with a speed that even Sunny himself wasn't capable of. With no muscle tissue connecting the bones together, the strange creature was still able to stand upright, run… and attack with vicious strength.

A moment before the undead monster closed the distance between them, Effie screamed:

"Stay together!"

Then, she turned her torso and slammed her shield against the lunging monstrosity. With a thunderous crack, the skeleton was thrown back. Its skull and ribcage shattered, showering the tunnel with sharp bone splinters. Like a broken marionette, it fell to the ground in a shapeless pile.

Sunny stared at the mess of broken bones with confusion.

'Wait… that's it?'

The huntress yelled, tearing him away from these thoughts:

"Don't stop, move!"

The cohort rushed forward, following Effie into the depths of the catacombs. When Sunny was approaching the remains of the reanimated skeleton, he noticed something that made a cold chill run down his spine.

The bones were still moving, slowly assembling themselves back into the shape that resembled a human. Just as he stepped past the creature, one skeletal hand suddenly thrust in his direction, trying to

claw at his leg. If not for Sunny's quick reaction, it might have succeeded in injuring him.

With one slash of the Midnight Shard, he crushed the clawing hand and threw it away. Falling on the stones a few meters back, the hand remained motionless for a moment, and then began crawling back to the quickly recovering skeleton.

The monster was being rebuilt by some terrifying, invisible force. Drawn by its unseen pull, the bones were putting themselves back together one after another. Those too damaged to be of use were simply replaced by one of the bones scattered on the floor of the tunnel. Soon, the skeleton would inevitably rise again.

A disturbing thought entered Sunny's mind.

He finally realized why Effie had told them to keep moving instead of trying to kill the Nightmare Creatures populating the catacombs.

Was it because these creatures were… immortal?

Or rather, undying.

Sunny felt a sickening premonition that he was right. If so, things were going to turn from bad to harrowing pretty fast...

It was at that moment that his ears caught a distant rustle coming from the darkness ahead of them. For a moment, he felt fear grip his heart, thinking that the dark sea had somehow found its way into the catacombs.

But no, this wasn't the cursed sea. Instead, it was dozens… no, hundreds of skeletal feet scraping against the cold stones of the catacombs.

Maybe even thousands of them.

The hordes of undead monsters populating the catacombs were coming to rip the six humans apart.

With a grimace of dark resentment on his face, Sunny gripped the Midnight Shard tighter and hurried after the other members of the

cohort.

'Come… come and get it, bastards!'

***

Pretty soon, the undead creatures were upon them. First in ones and pairs, then in small groups, the bloodthirsty skeletons assaulted them in a constant stream. Appearing from the darkness of the catacombs, they lunged at the cohort in a whirlwind of bony claws and teeth, each bearing the same eerie skeletal grin.

Effie and Nephis, who were at the front of the group, faced the brunt of the attacks. The huntress exerted her inhuman strength, bulldozing through the skeletons like an incarnation of ancient fury. Her round shield acted as a wrecking ball, shattering the undead monsters left and right.

Nephis fought with the elegant fluidity of water… but also with the crushing force of a devastating flood. She was holding the longsword by the blade, using its crossguard and pommel as an improvised mace. With white flames dancing in her eyes, she moved from one skeleton to another, skillfully deflecting their blows and crushing one skull after another.

If anything got past them, Caster was there to deliver the finishing blow. His sword shone with a ghostly green light, slicing through bones as if without meeting any resistance. The proud Legacy fought with graceful precision, always managing to immobilize the enemy with just one clean strike. The skeletons fell to his sword before even having a chance to retaliate.

The three powerhouses made paving the path through the horde of monsters seem almost easy. However, Sunny knew that it was anything but. Each skeleton was stronger and faster than a human could ever be. It took incredible skill, resolve, and coordination to cut through their ranks without slowing down even for a second.

Soon, he was forced to taste the true menace of these undead abominations for himself.

Sunny, Cassie, and Kai were relatively safe at first, but with each passing minute, their situation worsened.

The catacombs were a real maze. More and more often, the tunnels they were taking began to open into complicated crossroads and connect with other branching paths. When that happened, undead creatures could lunge at the cohort from the side, bypassing the impenetrable barrier of Changing Star and her two champions.

More than that, as the number of skeletons destroyed by them increased and several minutes passed, the abominable monsters began rising back from the ground and dashing in pursuit of the party, soon attacking it from the rear.

Eventually, the cohort was constantly assaulted from all sides.

When Sunny first had to raise his sword to repel a straggler that lunged at him from the side tunnel, he acted with calm precision engraved into him by countless hours of practice. Slashing with the Midnight Shard, he cleanly beheaded the undead creature. Augmented by the shadow, his tachi managed to cut through solid bone without that much effort.

Sunny knew that losing its head won't kill the skeleton, so he instantly shifted his balance and kicked the monster in the chest, throwing it back.

Although he expected that this would happen, the lack of the familiar voice whispering into his ear still unnerved him. Usually, he would have heard the announcement of the kill already.

But these abominations were immortal, so the Spell remained silent.

Lamenting the fact that he would not be getting any shadow fragments today, Sunny moved away from the decapitated skeleton and sighed.

'Well, at least this isn't as bad as I thought it would be.'

…But just a few minutes later, he bitterly regretted thinking those words aloud.

Chapter-195: Rolling Battle

Once the cohort was surrounded from every side, Sunny, Cassie and Kai had to join the battle in earnest.

Sunny wasn't too worried for the blind girl and the archer because they were protected by both the Stone Saint and the Quiet Dancer.

His Shadow was possibly the worst enemy the bloodthirsty skeletons could face. Moving with the cold precision of an emotionless battle machine, she used both her sword and shield to deflect and destroy any enemy that dared to approach them from the sides. The graceful and devastating dance she was performing was a true sight to behold.

The Quiet Dancer zipped through the air, supporting the Shadow and covering any lapse left in the barrier of steel created by her. If something got past the two of them, Kai was there, using the curved blade of his falcata to crush the undead monsters, almost as if felling them with an axe.

He was holding hands with Cassie, guiding the blind girl through the dark maze of the catacombs. However, it seemed as though her ability to orient herself in space had seen a considerable improvement in the past three months, perhaps due to the connection she shared with the flying rapier. She was now able to move quickly without using her wooden staff for support, at least.

Looking at the two of them, Sunny grew somewhat sullen. Both Kai and Cassie were incredibly beautiful people. Holding hands and surrounded by nothing but darkness and monsters, with the charming young man gripping an elegant sword, they looked like an image from a book cover. They looked perfect together.

Sunny, on the other hand…

Well, at least he had his shadow to keep him company. And the

Ordinary Rock…

However, he didn't have a lot of time to wallow in self-pity. Because his was the second most important role in this furious moving battle: holding the rear of the cohort all by himself.

'Let me show you what I'm capable of…'

As more and more skeletons rose from the ground and attacked the party from behind, Sunny had to really exert himself.

At first, he only had to fight one undead monster at a time. Despite their tremendous speed and strength, the skeletal creatures were not that hard to defeat. They seemed almost mindless, always attacking in the most straightforward way possible. Of course, a less prepared person would have been torn apart by these fierce creatures a long time ago…

But Sunny was not the same weak and inexperienced kid he had been seven months ago. The harrowing trials of the Forgotten Shore, as well as his tenacious will and grim resolve, had turned him into a fearsome creature, too.

In fact, in terms of pure viciousness, the skeletons had nothing on him at all.

Wrapping the Midnight Shard into the shadow to slice through the tough bones of the undead monsters easier, Sunny employed every bit of battle prowess he had learned from his practice with the Stone Saint to destroy his enemies.

Seamlessly weaving the firm and unassailable movements that he had learned from the taciturn stone creature into the flowing style taught to him by Nephis, he made short work of one skeleton after another. His blade sliced, slashed, and pierced through monster after monster, sending broken bones flying and cluttering to the ground.

Of course, maintaining this state without falling behind the cohort was not easy. Sunny had never practiced fighting while on the run, especially not while moving backward. However, remembering Effie's words, he knew that being separated from the group and surrounded

meant death, and thus made sure to never get too far away from his companions.

At first, the situation was if not easy, then at least within the scope of his capability. Sunny even thought that this was an excellent opportunity to put everything that he had learned in the past week to practice. Despite the fact that this battle was completely different from the way he had hunted monsters before, he was doing fine.

Back on the streets of the Dark City, he hunted at night, always attacking the enemy from the shadows and aiming to finish the fight with one strike. The initiative was on his side, and so he was the one dictating the flow of the combat.

However, right now, things were completely reversed. Sunny was the one being attacked, with enemies suddenly appearing from the darkness and instantly lunging at him. Put on the defensive, he had to react to the enemy attacks as opposed to being the one attacking.

And yet, he was managing. He had anticipated that a situation like that would inevitably happen and put enough flexibility into his technique to withstand any type of peril. He was indeed putting his lessons to practice, cementing them in his muscles and bones. After all, just like Nephis had said, a thousand hours of training was not as impactful as one real fight.

…But then, slowly, things began to change.

After he had ruthlessly cut down a handful of undead abominations, suddenly, two attacked him at the same time. Sunny cursed and ducked to the side, narrowly avoiding having his head crushed by one of the skeletons. His sword blocked the vicious strike from the other one, and, being pushed back a couple of steps by the force of the impact, he struggled to keep his balance.

Not letting the monsters continue their assault unobstructed, Sunny dashed forward and twisted his body. Kicking one creature in the chest, he used it to propel himself toward the other one and put all that weight into a devastating downward slash.

The skeleton crumbled into a pile of broken bones, and the edge of

the Midnight Shard scraped against the stones, causing sparks to fly into the air. Knowing that his momentum was too strong to stop now, Sunny instead went with it, rolled over his shoulder, and got back to his feet just in time to meet the attack of the remaining monster face to face.

His sword cut a sharp arc, severing both arms of the skeleton. Sunny instantly sidestepped the undead creature and delivered a low horizontal slash, breaking its legs.

Making sure that the monster wouldn't be standing up any time soon by piercing its skull with the tip of the Midnight Shard, he hurried to catch up with the cohort.

Briefly glancing at the rest of his companions, he made sure that they were not dead yet and swiftly turned around, ready to face the next monster.

Then, his heart skipped a beat.

'Curses!'

Three skeletons were rushing at him, menacing grins frozen on their skinless faces.

Chapter-196: Divine Intervention

After that, things became hectic.

Sunny had to push himself to the limit to fight against multiple opponents while maintaining the pace with the rest of the group. Knowing that slowing down meant death, he slashed, dodged, blocked and moved back without allowing himself even a moment of respite. Slowly but surely, countless wounds began accumulating on his body.

But even then, it wasn't enough.

So he pushed himself past his limit.

After all, this was the exact situation he had been preparing himself for by enduring the ruthless onslaught of the Stone Saint day after day. The inevitability of having to fight against an overwhelming force.

Dark, vehement fury ignited in his chest, washing away pain and fear.

"Come, come and get me! I'm right here!"

Who did they think they were trying to kill?

Noticing four new abominations answer his call, Sunny couldn't help but laugh.

'Good… good…'

Their assault came fast and without mercy, not leaving him any room to breathe. But Sunny welcomed it.

Dodging one of the skeletons, he dashed forward and positioned himself behind another one, so that its body blocked the path of the third.

He couldn't do anything about the fourth one for the moment, but its attack was accounted for… it was going to hurt like hell, but not to the point of killing him. Blood Weave was going to take care of the rest.

The Midnight Shard cut through the air and severed the undead creature's knee, causing it to clumsily fall to the ground. At the same time, cold fingers tore into Sunny's side. He had already shifted his body to make sure that they were not going to damage any vital organs.

With Puppeteer's Shroud taking most of the damage, Sunny only ended up receiving five deep scratches, which then instantly welled with blood.

'Ah! Crap! That hurts!'

But he didn't regret it. The only thing he regretted was the fact that, with the shadow wrapped around the Midnight Shard, he couldn't observe its movement during this long and arduous fight.

Just imagining the kind of insight he could have gleaned from it filled him with avarice.

Turning around and reversing his grip on the sword, Sunny commanded the shadow to move onto his body. Almost instantly, he felt a rush of power fill his muscles. In the same fluid movement, Sunny took a step toward the monster that had just wounded him and delivered a crushing blow with the pommel of the tachi.

The skeleton's jaw flew away in a rain of broken teeth. Taking another quick step, Sunny circled around the disoriented creature, hooked his hand around its damaged skull, and tore it clean off the spine.

Then he pushed the decapitated creature into the two remaining ones, briefly slowing down their approach. By the time the undead

abominations regained their balance, Sunny was already upon them. The Midnight Shard flashed three times, turning the three skeletons into three piles of bones.

Taking a step back, he narrowly avoided the claws of the last remaining skeleton — the one whose leg he had chopped off at the start of the skirmish. Sunny glanced at the creature that was madly crawling toward him and finished it off with one powerful thrust.

Then, he groaned.

'Ah, crap… I think I overdid it…'

Sunny was bruised, hurting all over, and covered in blood. What's worse, he was exhausted. This moving battle was too intense and had lasted for too long. Even with his endurance enhanced by the Blood Weave, he was nearing the point where his performance would start dropping rapidly.

Once that happened, he would die. Because the damn undead creatures were not only immortal, but also tireless.

Just as this thought appeared in Sunny's mind, a new wave of skeletons lunged at him from the depths of the tunnel.

Tiredly raising his sword, he gritted his teeth.

'Time for plan B…'

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At some point, the tunnel they were currently in was briefly drowned in a brilliant wave of pure white light. Glancing over his shoulder, Sunny noticed that Nephis had finally summoned her flames, channeling them into the blade of her sword — just like on the day they had fought against the Carapace Demon.

Faced with the blinding radiance of the incandescent blade, the skeletons almost seemed to melt.

'Perfect timing!'

Using the momentary disorientation of his own opponents, Sunny dashed back and commanded the Stone Saint to switch places with him. As they passed each other, he sent the shadow from his own body onto that of the taciturn stone knight.

Almost immediately, the Shadow Saint's eyes blazed with menacing carmine fire. Her skin shone with dark radiance, and wisps of ghostly grey fog appeared from beneath her stonelike armor like dancing flames. The impenetrable darkness of the catacombs suddenly seemed to become even deeper, embracing her like a vast black mantle.

'Yeah, I have some tricks up my sleeve too...'

A second later, the Shadow crashed into the undead creatures, sending splinters of bones and severed limbs flying through the air. She proceeded to massacre them, moving from one to another in a graceful storm of darkness and destruction.

Taking her place near Kai and Cassie, Sunny was finally able to rest for a few seconds. His battered body was screaming with pain, and the grey fabric of the Puppeteer's Shroud had turned heavy with blood.

With two wielders of Divine Aspects activating their hidden cards almost simultaneously, the cohort got a chance to catch their breaths for a few short moments. However, it was clear that this calm wouldn't last long.

Sunny didn't really want to show all his cards yet, but the situation left him little choice. He doubted he could continue this mad dash for much longer. Plus, chances were that the rest of the party, preoccupied as they were with their own share of the undead monsters, would either fail to notice the sudden alteration happening to the Stone Saint or assume that it was just an Ability of hers.

Using the opportunity, Sunny took a look at the condition of his companions.

…It was not good.

Changing Star's armor was battered and torn, with blood seeping

down her right side. Effie's shield looked like it was on the verge of coming apart, while her white chiton was painted red. Caster managed to preserve some semblance of a collected look, however, there was a deep gash under one of his eyes, his face bloodied and grim.

Kai was doing not much better. He was pale and visibly exhausted, his auburn hair disheveled and soaked with sweat.

...Sunny didn't even want to think about his own sorry appearance.

Only Cassie, whose tier-six armor made her less likely to be attacked by an enemy, looked more or less fine. However, her flying rapier had several visible nicks on its slender blade, and looked tired and dispirited overall… as much as a flying weapon could look like anything.

In short, one thing was painfully apparent from their state.

If things didn't change soon, all of them were going to die…

Skillfully using his sword to cut down a skeleton that had suddenly lunged at him from a side passage, Sunny strained his lungs and shouted:

"Hey! Effie! How far are we from the exit from this damned place?! When is this going to end?!"

Swatting away an undead monster of her own, the huntress briefly glanced back and grinned.

"What do you mean, "end"?!"

'What does she mean what do I mean? Isn't it obvious?'

Turning back to concentrate on the horde of enemies in front of them, Effie yelled:

"What end?! This was just a warm-up!"

Chapter-197: Ultimate Test

Sunny cursed and prepared himself for the worst. A few moments later, the short respite they had gotten was over.

With a sound that reminded him of rushing water, a terrifying wave of undead monsters crashed into their formation, threatening to break it apart. Effie braced for the impact and withstood the furious onslaught, somehow managing to split the wave in two.

From one side, Changing Star dove into the torrent of skeletal wraiths, her incandescent sword cutting through them like a ray of pure sunlight piercing the darkness. From the other, Caster's enchanted blade was doing the same. The scion of the Han Li clan moved with astonishing speed, turning into a blurry whirlwind of ghostly green steel.

Everything that touched it turned to dust.

Sunny glanced at Kai and said in a hoarse voice:

"Prepare yourself."

In the next moment, the wave of monsters was upon them.

Left without the comforting protection of his shadow, Sunny could only rely on his own ability, cunning, and technique. Dashing forward, he clashed with the first skeleton. His sword flashed through the air with lightning speed, and a headless corpse instantly fell to his feet, blindly clawing at the stones in front of it.

Sunny had never fought like this. From the first day on the Forgotten Shore, he always had something helping him resist the horrors of the Dream Realm — be it his shadow, cover of darkness, Changing Star, or the Stone Saint. Now, he had to face the torrent of Nightmare Creature with nothing but his own frail human body... and resolve.

This was the ultimate test of pure skill.

Gritting his teeth, Sunny tried to remember the feeling of clarity he had experienced after the carapace centurion had crushed his ribcage with one strike of its terrifying bone scythe. All unnecessary thoughts were obliterated by his will, leaving only two.

Kill your enemy.

Prevent the enemy from killing you.

Using this clarity, he entered the state of flow. His perception expanded, absorbing every detail and aspect of what was happening in the dark tunnel. His thinking accelerated, turning the mayhem that surrounded them into a stark and streamlined pattern of cause and effect.

Connected to the underlying law of it all, Sunny was able to react to the actions of his enemies faster and predict them better.

…Ssssshimmm!

With a hissing sound, the Midnight Shard cut the air and slashed the next monster across the chest, splitting the skeleton diagonally in two. Without paying the defeated creature any attention, Sunny instantly lunged at the next one.

His movements were fluid and unpredictable, but also grounded and firm. Every strike, every step was calculated and efficient, focused on delivering the maximum amount of damage while preserving as much of his strength as possible. It was a perfect combination of the two seemingly contradictory battle styles that he had learned.

Just like that, Sunny danced between the countless undead monsters, his sword cutting one after another down. The Midnight Shard wasn't unimaginably sharp like Caster's jian, nor filled with annihilating white flame like Neph's radiant longsword. However, it refused to give in and remained unbroken. No matter how many tough bones the tachi cut, not a single dent appeared on its blade.

With blood streaming down his body and sweat biting his eyes, his muscles on the verge of breaking apart and his lungs desperately

burning for air, Sunny somehow kept up this mad tempo and fought, fought, fought.

At some point, he heard a furious roar from somewhere ahead and briefly looked up, noticing that Effie had dismissed her battered round shield and finally summoned the beautiful bronze spear. With it in her hands, the huntress became even more deadly. Multiple skeletons burst into a shower of broken bones, cut apart by a wide arc of the ancient weapon.

However, at the same time, more and more wounds started accumulating on Effie's body.

…Despite everything, things weren't going well for the cohort.

Or at least, it seemed that way for a while.

At some point, however, Sunny noticed that the number of skeletons attacking the cohort from the front had begun to diminish. Pretty soon, Nephis, Effie and Caster were getting a few moments to catch their breaths from time to time. The pressure on himself had also lessened.

The Stone Saint, on the other hand, had to hold off an ever-increasing number of undead creatures attacking the party from the rear. When the balance of the rolling battle noticeably shifted, Changing Star gave a command to change the formation of the cohort.

She quickly dashed back to reinforce the taciturn Shadow, while Sunny moved forward to support Caster and Effie at the head of the group.

Once he got there, the huntress gave him a tired smile.

"Hey, doofus. You… look like shit."

Sunny glanced down and had to agree with her. With his armor torn in a dozen places and soaked through and through with blood, he looked pretty much exactly as dead as the Nightmare Creatures they were fighting.

However, Effie's state wasn't any better.

He smiled crookedly.

"Thanks. You're quite a looker yourself, you know."

The huntress scoffed and then turned away to face another of the undead abominations.

"Hold fast! We're almost there!"

She told the truth.

After several more minutes of furious fighting, the tunnel they were moving through suddenly opened into a large cavern. A few meters in front of them, the floor of the catacombs was broken, collapsing into a vast, seemingly bottomless chasm. That terrifying abyss was filled with darkness that even Sunny's sight couldn't pierce.

The chasm was no less than forty meters across and stretched far into the distance to both left and right, like a dark border separating the world of the living from the world of the dead. A rickety rope bridge was drawn across it, connecting to a similar-looking tunnel at the other end of the abyssal chasm.

The rope bridge looked like a derelict of ancient times. It was flimsy, slippery, and rotten through and through.

'She doesn't expect us to actually use it, does she? It's so obvious that this thing will collapse as soon as we step on it! Has she not seen any sageuk?! Even if others somehow survive, there's no chance that I, with that damn [Fated] Attribute, will make it to the other end...'

Sunny turned to Effie and scowled, really hoping to be surprised by her answer.

"So, what now?"

The huntress looked at him in confusion.

"What else? We cross the bridge!"

Chapter-198: Last Stand

Sunny sighed.

Of course, they had to cross the bridge. Why had he even bothered to ask?

'Great!'

At least the damn thing was empty of the skeletons. The path to the other side of the chasm was clear.

'What is clear is that I'm going to die!'

While Sunny was consumed by these unhappy ruminations, Effie and Caster quickly threw the few undead creatures remaining in front of them over the edge of the chasm. Finally safe from their constant attacks, most of the cohort took a chance to quickly catch their breaths.

Only Nephis and the Stone Saint were still fighting. In fact, the overwhelming pressure of the pursuing horde had grown so heavy that they were barely holding on.

Two figures — one shrouded in shadows, the other bathed in pure white light — were slowly buckling under the furious onslaught of the army of the dead.

Sunny gritted his teeth.

…If nothing changed, they were going to be the ones being thrown into the dark abyss very soon.

With a grim expression on his face, he glanced at Effie and said:

"Go."

Leaning on her spear, the huntress weakly shook her head.

"Someone will have to hold them off long enough for everyone to get to the other side. You should…"

Sunny interrupted her.

"I'll be the last one to cross. Don't worry… I have a plan."

A crazy plan. But what else was new?

Giving him a long look, Effie hesitated for a few seconds, then nodded.

"Alright. Stay alive, Sunny."

He quietly chuckled.

"Aww. I didn't know you cared."

She stared at him for a bit, and then calmly said:

"No, it's just that if you die, pretty soon I'll have to fight your scrawny corpse. So… don't do that. Okay?"

With that, Effie beckoned others to follow her and stepped on the rickety bridge.

Sunny blinked a couple of times, watched her go, then turned his back to the chasm and sighed.

'Right. What else did I expect?'

In any case, there was no way back now.

Brandishing the Midnight Shard, he dashed forward and joined Changing star and the Shadow Saint in their desperate fight.

Dispatching a couple of skeletons, Sunny briefly turned to Nephis and said:

"Retreat to the bridge. Saint and I will hold them off!"

Her eyes shone with white flames through the visor of the Starlight Legion Armor's helmet. A moment later, he heard a hoarse voice:

"Are you sure?"

He dodged the claws of an especially menacing monster, bashed it away with the pommel of the tachi, and yelled:

"Yes! But…"

Another undead creature fell to the Midnight Shard.

"...when you get to the other side, you need to destroy the supports of the bridge. Do you understand?"

Changing Star hesitated, almost missing the timing of her attack. Then, she asked:

"What about you?"

Sunny laughed.

"Don't worry about it. I have a way to get across!"

Neph didn't answer for a while. Finally, she simply said:

"Alright."

Not one to waste words, Changing Star didn't say anything else. When the opportunity presented itself, she silently retreated, letting Sunny take her place.

'Now… for the hardest part…'

With Nephis gone, all the monsters of the catacombs descended upon the Stone Saint and him. Sunny cursed, feeling that the tiniest mistake would spell his doom.

The onslaught of the undead horde was beyond anything he had expected. Desperately trying not to drown in the torrent of ferocious abominations, Sunny fought with everything he had left.

'Damn… it… all! How the hell was she able to hold this position for

so long?!'

Not prone to heroic displays, Sunny used the Shadow as a meat shield… stone shield?... and hid behind her from time to time, emerging from the cover of the taciturn monster only to deliver a strike or two and disappear again. The two of them worked beautifully together, almost as if sharing one mind.

Well, what else did he expect? She was his Shadow, after all. And his shadow was currently wrapped around her stone body.

The armor of the menacing knight was still mostly intact. However, even it was battered and broken in several places. With a dark expression on his face, Sunny noticed a stream of ruby dust pouring from one of the breaches.

The Stone Saint was wounded.

'This needs to end fast…'

Feeling his own endurance running out, Sunny wanted nothing more than to fall to the ground and rest, even if it meant dying. But instead, he doubled the intensity of his attacks. There was no need to hold anything back and preserve his strength anymore. He just had to last for a bit more… a dozen seconds, at most…

But even a dozen seconds seemed like an impossible dream.

Impossible… he knew someone who was in the habit of making impossible things happen…

With a furious growl, Sunny cut another skeleton apart, received a glancing blow to his already wounded side, and stumbled back. The Shadow appeared in front of him, enduring a rain of attacks with the help of her already battered shield. Her feet slid on the stones, but the taciturn knight stubbornly held.

'Goddamit! When?!'

As if answering his silent cry, and loud rattle followed by a thunderous boom informed him that the bridge had been brought down.

Now, there was nothing connecting the two sides of the terrifying chasm. Sunny was left alone against the horde of immortal monsters, with no way to retreat.

'Finally.'

Turning his back to the undead creatures, Sunny peered into the darkness. Seeing the cohort waiting for him on the other side of the dark abyss, he lingered for a moment, sighed, and ran to its edge.

The shadow slipped from the body of the Stone Saint and wrapped itself around his own. Suddenly weakened, the taciturn monster held the entire horde back by herself for a split second, and then dissolved into darkness, returning to the tranquil expanse of the Soul Sea.

With no obstacles to slow them down anymore, the flood of skeletons lunged forward. They were just a meter or two behind Sunny, stretching their deadly claws to tear him apart.

'Too close!'

Approaching the abyssal chasm, Sunny briefly glanced into the impenetrable darkness that filled it…

…And, without pausing even for a second, jumped off the edge.

Chapter-199: Cliffhanger

'Crap!'

Jumping into the bottomless dark abyss, Sunny briefly regretted every decision he had ever made in his life.

How did he end up in this situation? Where did he go wrong?

However, there was no time for self-reflection. He wasn't ready to see his whole life flash before his eyes yet.

There were more pressing matters.

Before the momentum of his jump waned, Sunny summoned the Prowling Thorn. By the time the triangular dagger materialized in his hand, he was already beginning to fall. Not wasting any time, Sunny threw it with as much power as he could while simultaneously sending the shadow from his hand onto the blade of the kunai.

The throwing dagger flashed in the darkness of the underground cavern, streaked the wide chasm, and embedded itself into the hard rock on the other side of it. Because of the enhancement of the shadow, it got deeply lodged in the stone.

'Yes!'

A moment later, the invisible string connecting the Prowling Thorn to Sunny's wrist drew tight. Instantly, his hand was violently jerked forward. Holding on for his dear life, Sunny swung through the darkness with incredible speed. Behind him, dozens of skeletons plummeted into the chasm, with more being pushed down with each second.

However, he was already far away.

'Ha! Bite it, you bastards!'

A couple of seconds later, all humor was smashed out of him by the hard impact against the opposite wall of the crevice. Sunny tried to soften the blow a little, but it still hurt like crazy. His bones groaned, on the verge of breaking apart.

A couple of them probably did.

Sunny blacked out for a moment or two. When he came back to his senses, his wrist was in agony, with the invisible string of the Prowling Thorn slowly cutting deep into its skin. Hissing, Sunny gripped the thin string with his other hand and relieved a part of the pressure.

Then, he looked up.

Ten or so meters above him, five pale faces hovered above the edge of the cliff. On them were written expressions of horror, shock, and astonishment.

'Oh. Right. I guess they don't know about this Memory of mine.'

To the cohort, his desperate trick must have looked like… simple suicide. From the perspective of people who didn't know about the secret enchantment of the Prowling Thorn, Sunny just took a running start and jumped into the abyss, only to disappear into its darkness without a trace.

It was as though he had chosen to sacrifice his life to give the others a chance to escape. Like some sort of a stupid hero would.

'Do they even know me? Like I'd ever do something like that...'

Swinging on the invisible string, Sunny strained his aching chest and yelled:

"Hey, idiots! I'm down here!"

Slowly, four of the five faces turned to look straight down. Their expressions were rather comical.

Cassie simply tilted her head.

...But her expression was priceless as well.

Grinning, Sunny began to climb up. Since the string of the Prowling Thorn could change its length at will, he commanded it to shorten and rode comfortably all the way up, stepping lightly on the vertical wall of the chasm from time to time to make the process faster.

Soon, he climbed over the edge of the cliff and sprawled on the cold ground, breathing heavily.

The rest of the cohort just stared at him.

"...What?"

Effie was the first to speak:

"Uh… glad you're alive, Sunny. But also… what the hell? How did you do that?"

He simply threw her the kunai. Once the huntress bent down to pick it up, Sunny pulled on the invisible string and made the dagger fly back into his hand.

"Oh, that? That was a piece of cake. Nothing that a knife and a piece of string can't solve... more or less."

He decided to omit the fact that he had almost soiled his pants in the few short moments between jumping off the edge of the chasm and successfully embedding the Prowling Thorn into the rocks on the other side of it.

Effie blinked a couple of times, then slowly straightened herself up.

"...Cool Memory. Where did you get it?"

Sunny dismissed the kunai and tiredly waved his hand.

"You know those porcupine monsters back in the city? I got it off one of those."

With that, the others left him alone. They were all hurt and dead tired, too. Everyone needed to rest and patch up their wounds.

Nephis made a move to try and heal them, but was stopped by Effie. The huntress darkly shook her head.

"Not yet. There's one last hurdle to overcome. We'll need you to be at the top of your game."

Changing Star glanced at her, lingered for a few moments, but then sat back down. Out here, the word of the pathfinder was the law. If Effie said that Nephis needed to save her strength, then she had to obey.

Sunny was too exhausted to care. He knew that he was not going to bleed out thanks to the Blood Weave, and that was enough for now.

He just wanted to rest.

Some time later, he heard a shuffling sound and looked up to see Kai sitting down near him. The charming archer looked way too pretty and put together for a person who had just lived through the same mayhem as them, but Sunny was starting to suspect that this infuriating trait was just something he would have to come to terms with.

Maybe Kai had some weird Attribute that made him look good no matter the circumstance.

Looking at the beautiful young man, Sunny sighed and said:

"Hey, Night. How are you doing?"

Kai scratched the back of his head and answered:

"Ah... alright, I guess. That was intense back there, huh?"

Sunny nodded.

"Yeah. So… what's up?"

The charming archer hesitated for a bit.

"Nothing, really. I just wanted to say three things to you."

'What a strange guy.'

"Oh? Alright, go on."

Kai looked at him thoughtfully and said:

"Well, first of all, I now fully understand what you meant when you said that you are crazy. Because that jump of yours… that was really crazy!"

Sunny chuckled.

"I guess so. I'm alive, though, aren't I?"

The archer gave him a nod and smiled.

"Another thing I wanted to say is that I also understood how you managed to survive all those months in the ruins. Your swordsmanship… I've never seen anything like it. I think that very few people in the Dark City would survive a clash against you. So, everything makes more sense now."

Sunny didn't know how to feel about that praise. On one hand, it was nice to be acknowledged for something he worked so hard on. On the other hand, he still preferred being considered a cowardly weakling.

It made killing fools far easier.

He shrugged.

"Thanks, I guess. What is the third thing?"

Kai was silent for a long time, as though trying to find the right words. Finally, he shook his head and cautiously said:

"Right. About that jump of yours… you do remember that I can fly, right? So I could have carried you over the chasm, no problem. So, uh… why did you do it?"

Sunny stared at him silently for a while, an inexorable expression on

his face.

'...Goddamit.'

To be honest, in the chaos of it all, he did forget about this crucial detail.

After a long stretch of awkward silence, Sunny opened his mouth and said in a flat tone:

"Oh, you know. It just seemed like a good idea at the moment."

Kai blinked and gave him a strange look.

"A… a good idea?"

Sunny cleared his throat, then glared at the charming young man.

"It worked, didn't it? So… let's not talk about it again... ever. Okay?"

Chapter-200: Descent

After a while, Sunny regained enough of his senses to warily look around.

The tunnel they were currently in was somewhat different from those they had traversed while fighting the horde of undead monsters. It looked more weathered and decrepit, with its walls and floor smoothed and uneven, as though eroded by something over the course of countless years.

What's worse, it was… wet. With a cold shiver, Sunny realized that they were surrounded by puddles of black water.

The smell of sea salt permeated the air.

Looking up, he found the tall figure of the boisterous huntress and asked in a raspy voice:

"Where are we?"

Effie glanced at him and gestured up.

"A hundred meters or so below the surface, pretty much exactly under the city wall."

He stared at her blankly, slowly comprehending the meaning of these words. The huntress gave him a nod.

"Yeah, you guessed correctly. Come night, this place is going to be full of seawater. That chasm behind us is what prevents the catacombs from being flooded by the dark sea."

She sighed tiredly.

"So, unless we want to drown or be eaten by some depth dweller, we need to get out of here as soon as possible."

Sunny closed his eyes, imagining a roaring torrent of black water erupting from the mouths of countless tunnels and falling into the abyssal chasm like waterfalls made of pure darkness.

Yeah, if they were still underground when that happened, sea monsters would be the least of their problems. The sea itself would kill them.

Luckily, the day was still young.

Effie's words served as a signal. A few moments later, Nephis rose to her feet and glanced at the members of the cohort. Her pale face was calm and composed.

"Time to go. Gather your strength."

With sighs and groans of pain, everyone stood up. Sunny was the last one to follow suit.

'Ouch, that hurts. I'm really starting to wonder if fighting Harus was a better choice.'

But no, it wasn't. Terrible as it might have been, the battle with the skeletons was at least predictable. The damned hunchback, on the other hand, was a complete unknown.

There was nothing worse than facing an enemy that you knew nothing about.

As the cohort headed deeper into the tunnel, Sunny caught up with Effie and asked with a hint of idle curiosity in his voice:

"By the way, how do you even know your way around the catacombs?"

It wasn't like she could have leisurely explored these deadly tunnels alone.

The huntress gave him a dubious look and shrugged.

"This knowledge is sort of passed down between the outer settlement hunters. I've been here a couple of times before, trying to escape from

especially terrible Nightmare Creatures. Although, to be honest, I only descended this deep into the catacombs once."

Effie shivered.

"I was new in the Dark City at that time. Back then, the strongest hunter in the outer settlement sort of took me under her wing. We went down here with an entire party."

Sunny scratched the back of his head and grimaced when his battered body protested against the sudden movement.

"Yeah? That party must have been very strong, to return from this place alive."

The huntress glanced at him and smiled darkly.

"...Who said anything about returning alive? Actually, they all died. I was the only one to survive."

Sunny stared at her for a long time, and then asked:

"If they all died, then why the hell did you bring us here?"

Effie shrugged.

"Because no matter how strong that party was, they weren't even close to this one. Do you even realize how powerful the six of us are, all put together? Goddamn. I wouldn't want to be our enemy."

Then, she hesitated for a few moments and added:

"Plus, this time, I know what we're going to face. We'll get out of here in one piece, trust me."

Sunny wasn't a particularly trusting person, but at this point, he didn't really have a choice. Leaving the tall huntress alone, he walked in silence for a while.

The tunnels were now strongly angled down. With each minute, the cohort was descending deeper and deeper underground.

Slowly, his curiosity awakened. Now that the harrowing battle against the army of the dead was behind them, Sunny began to wonder about something peculiar.

Where exactly did all those human skeletons come from?

There were hundreds, if not thousands of them down here in the catacombs. Even if every hunter that had ever lived in the outer settlement died in these tunnels, their number wouldn't account for that much.

Not to mention that people who perished in the Dark City tended to end up eaten by some terrible monster, their bones pulverized into dust by its teeth.

His pointless pondering was interrupted by Effie, who suddenly gestured for the cohort to stop.

After discussing something with Nephis, she gave her a nod and turned to the rest of them:

"Listen up. We're close to the central chamber of this maze. The exit to the surface is right ahead. However, getting to it won't be easy."

The tall huntress hesitated, and then said:

"If we want to make it outside, we will have to act fast. There's a big fat bastard of a Nightmare Creature that lives in that chamber. However, it takes time for it to fully wake up. So… don't stop to look at it, don't panic, don't lose your cool. It might look scary, but if you follow Neph and do what she tells you to do, you should be alright."

She waited for a bit to make sure that everyone understood her meaning, and then grinned.

"Alright. If everyone is ready, let's go meet the Lord of the Dead."

'Wha… Lord of the Dead?'

Not liking the sound of this name one bit, Sunny summoned the Midnight Shard and reluctantly followed after Effie.

…Soon, they entered a giant underground chamber.

Once Sunny saw what was inside of it, his eyes grew wide.

He finally understood where all those skeletal wraiths came from.

He also understood where the inhabitants of the ancient city had disappeared to.

…They were all here.

Chapter-201: Lord of the Dead

The giant underground chamber was circular in shape and as immense as the grand hall of the Bright Castle. Its walls were built out of the same grey stone slabs as the mighty walls of the Dark City, but unlike them, the walls of the chamber were covered with whispering streams of cold, nebulous black water.

In the center of it, a vast mountain of human bones rose from the ground, reaching almost halfway to the distant ceiling. Thousands… no, hundreds of thousands of people must have perished to create it.

With a harrowing realization, Sunny finally understood where the people who built the ancient city and the impregnable wall surrounding it had disappeared to.

They were all here, piled onto each other in this vile monument of death. This horrid dark chamber was their final resting place.

An old memory suddenly surfaced in his mind.

Back beneath the branches of the Soul Tree, Cassie had seen a vision of a bloodsoaked hill formed from countless corpses. On top of it, a tiny black seed was floating in a pool of blood.

Was there a similar mountain of bones hiding under the soil of the Ashen Barrow? Was that how the Soul Devourer had been born?

Sunny shifted his gaze, only now noticing the veins of crimson coral growing from the harrowing hill of white bones, almost like muscle tissue of some colossal creature. Following the coral pillars up, he finally saw that the dome of the immense chamber was broken, with pale sunlight streaming through the breach and falling on the ghastly visage below.

A giant stone hand was reaching down through the broken dome, its

palm open, as though trying to caress the mountain formed from the bones of those people who had once populated this dark, forsaken land.

Looking at the stone hand, Sunny suddenly realized where they were.

The vast underground chamber was situated directly underneath the headless statue of the graceful woman who had once saved them from drowning in the black waters of the cursed sea.

One of her hands was raised toward the heavens, as if trying to embrace them. The other had broken off and fell down thousands of years ago, lying in the mud at the base of the giant statue.

…Reaching into the depths of hell, that was the hand Sunny was looking at right now.

It was also their way out of here.

"Doofus! Wake up!"

Brought back to reality by Effie's yell, he shuddered and looked around with a new understanding.

So the exit the huntress had told them about was the breach in the dome of the underground chamber. With Kai's Aspect Ability and the help of the golden rope, escaping through it was not going to be a problem.

But… where was this Lord of the Dead that she had mentioned? From Effie's colorful description, Sunny had expected to see a giant monster slumbering in the heart of the catacombs.

If memory served, her exact words were "a big fat bastard of a Nightmare Creature".

But he couldn't see anything.

Unless…

His eyes narrowed.

And just at that moment, the mountain of bones suddenly moved.

***

When the mountain moved, everything suddenly made sense.

At first, Sunny thought that the unknown creature was sleeping inside the ghastly hill of bones. But then he realized that no, it wasn't.

The mountain itself was the Nightmare Creature.

This was the Lord of the Dead.

Each of the countless bones piled on top of each other in the underground chamber was a part of its body.

For a moment, Sunny was paralyzed by fear.

'Fat bastard?! That is what you call a fat bastard?!'

But then, the disparate pieces of information clicked in his mind, assembling into a vivid chain of cause and effect.

'Of course. Why didn't I realize sooner?'

The mountain of bones, the horde of immortal skeletons, the Lord of the Dead… it all connected.

The Nightmare Creature in front of him was a Fallen Tyrant.

Tyrants were a fifth step in the evolution of Nightmare Creatures, and the name of that class was not coincidental. The fifth step represented rule and authority.

That's why the blind monstrosity he had faced on the slopes of the Black Mountain was named a King, and that's why the abomination in front of him was named a Lord.

Classes differed from each other in terms of pure might, but most of the distinction between them was caused by a more fundamental reason. Higher classes possessed characteristics that, while not

directly affecting the quantity of their power, gave it a qualitative change.

For example, while beasts were mindless, demons and those above them were intelligent. That's why a demon, even if it was only slightly stronger than a monster, was in fact ten times more dangerous.

The characteristic of the Tyrant class was that these Nightmare Creatures were capable of creating and controlling large amounts of lesser creatures. The Mountain King's Larva that Sunny had slain during his first trial, which was born when a tiny worm living inside the Mountain King's body entered the corpse of a dying slave, was one such lesser creature.

However, this power had its limitations. The minions created by a tyrant couldn't be of the same rank as it. That's why the Larva was a dormant beast, while Mountain King itself was Awakened.

Similarly, while the skeletons that the cohort had faced were Awakened, they had to be created by a Fallen Tyrant.

…And something told Sunny that their immortality was tied to the Lord of the Dead, too. If someone wanted to destroy the undead army, they would have to destroy the abominable bone colossus first.

Said colossus, meanwhile, was slowly waking up right in front of Sunny. And if when it did…

'Damnation!'

Nervously gripping the Midnight Shard, he glanced at Nephis.

The golden rope was already in her hands, and she was passing it to Kai.

Before the beautiful archer could take it, though, the mountainous creature suddenly rippled.

A moment later, a twisted pillar of bones shot from its body, flying in their direction with the force of a siege ram…

Chapter-202: Risk and Reward

Nephis and Kai dove away, and the massive pillar of bone shot past them. Before the thunderous sound of it crashing against the wall of the chamber even reached Sunny's ears, the pillar was already moving, whipping sideways with tremendous force.

Luckily, he and Cassie were behind it… but Effie and Caster were not. Both of them reacted with admirable speed and fell to the ground, allowing the terrifying limb of the gargantuan creature to fly above their heads.

Rising from the stone floor, the huntress screamed:

"It's just thrashing in its sleep! Move! We need to get out of here before the bastard wakes up!"

Cursing, Sunny dismissed the Midnight Shard and faced the mountain of bones, trying to predict its next move. He was beginning to understand how Effie's original hunting party had perished in the catacombs.

A sword wouldn't be of any use in this situation.

The Lord of the Dead was slowly coming to its senses. The bones constituting its repulsive body moved and rippled, unfurling from within the white mass like giant, twisting limbs. It seemed to be slowly turning from a shapeless hill into some semblance of a creature.

What shape that creature would assume once it fully awoke, Sunny didn't want to know.

Another twisting pillar… limb?... suddenly shot from the mass of bones, blindly striking at the empty space behind the giant abomination. Sunny gritted his teeth, his ears ringing from the

thunderclap of its impact against the wall. What followed was a deafening noise of thousands of ancient bones scraping against weathered stone.

The massive pillar whipped left and right, then fell to the ground and slowly retreated back inside the body of the Lord of the Dead.

Meanwhile, Nephis was back at her feet. Dashing toward Kai, she pushed one end of the golden rope into his hands and pointed to the breach in the dome of the chamber. In the next moment, the archer soared into the air, flying to his destination with incredible speed.

With a terrifying scraping sound, the whole white mountain rippled once again, and several devastating pillars of bone shot to intercept him.

However, Sunny had no time to check on Kai.

Because the Lord of the Dead had extended two more limbs in his direction.

Diving under the first one, Sunny felt a wave of fetid air rush past him. Knowing that he only had a second left to live, he then strained his muscles and jumped with all his shadow-augmented might. Sunny's body flew several meters into the air, avoiding the rushing bone tentacle only by a few centimeters.

Landing in a roll, Sunny cursed and got back to his feet.

'What kind of an infernal jumping rope game is this?!'

The Lord of the Dead was slowly coming to its senses. More bone tentacles appeared from the mass of corpses, each moving with growing precision.

But Kai was already standing on the palm of the giant stone hand, the golden rope looped around one of its fingers.

Cassie was the first one to climb up. With the flying rapier loyally hovering over her shoulder, the blind girl effortlessly moved up the rope, reaching the distant ceiling of the underground chamber less than ten seconds later. It was easy to forget that she had absorbed as

much soul essence as the rest of them. Her delicate arms hid much more power than one would assume.

…However, back on the ground, those seconds were a real hell. The mountainous creature was waking up, making it hard for the rest of them to stay away from its blindly thrashing limbs.

They needed to get out of here fast.

Effie was the next one to take the rope. The huntress practically flew up, pushing herself with agility and herculean strength worthy of an ancient hero.

Then, it was Caster's turn. Effortlessly dodging a pillar of bone with his incredible speed, the Legacy grabbed the rope… and turned into a barely visible blur. A second later, he was already landing on the giant stone palm.

Nephis and Sunny were the only ones left in the reach of the Fallen Tyrant. Glancing at Sunny, Changing Star yelled:

"Your turn!"

…However, Sunny did not respond.

His eyes were fixed on the base of the gargantuan abomination, where, amidst the ancient bones…

A weak golden glow emanated from a small, partially concealed object.

Sunny lingered for a moment, his thoughts moving with incredible speed. He knew that he was a greedy person by nature, and one cursed with insatiable curiosity, too. However, first and foremost, he was someone who put a tremendous amount of value on his own survival.

That's why, right now, his reasoning was cold and sober.

It was a question of risk and reward, as well as his ability.

Would he be able to reach the object shining with the light of

divinity and come back alive, or not?

A second later, he looked at Nephis and answered:

"You go. I'll be just behind you."

...It would be a shame to go through all of this and not receive anything in return. He had to try.

With that, Sunny turned around and dashed toward the Lord of the Dead.

The decision was made, and now all that was left was to execute it.

Summoning the Prowling Thorn, he threw it at the mountain of bones. Of course, Sunny didn't hope to wound the tyrant. He just wanted to lodge the kunai in its body.

Just as the throwing dagger pierced the mass of bones, a white limb suddenly shot in his direction, obstructing everything with its repulsive expanse. Commanding the invisible string to contract, Sunny jumped high into the air and flew forward as though launched from a cannon.

Landing on the other side of the pillar, just a few steps away from the unencompassable mass of bones, he gritted his teeth…

And then thrust his hand inside the Fallen Tyrant's body.

A moment later, his fist closed around the concealed object, and with some effort, Sunny pulled it out in the clatter of breaking bones. A sharp pain pierced his forearm.

Opening his fist, he saw… a small, intricate iron key. It looked almost ordinary, if not for the ethereal golden glow emanating from within it.

In the next moment, Sunny suddenly staggered, feeling a wave of weakness washed over his body.

Rotating his forearm, he stared blankly at it for a split second, trying to comprehend what he was seeing.

And when he did, his eyes widened in terror.

Chapter-203: Corpse Eater

Glistening in the dim twilight of the underground chamber, an enormous leech was attached to his forearm. The creature was about a meter long, its slimy skin slightly translucent and red as dried blood.

It was indescribably repulsive.

…What's worse, though, was that its sucker had effortlessly broken through the leather vambrace of the Puppeteer's Shroud and sunk deep into Sunny's arm, splitting open his skin and muscles.

Currently, the leech was gorging on his blood, its belly slowly ballooning as crimson fluid rushed into it with frightening speed.

'Ah… ah… aaaah!'

With a sense of disgust and horror, Sunny slammed his fist into the spongy flesh of the revolting monster. Augmented with the power of shadows, his punch was powerful enough to easily break a human skull.

The abhorrent slug, however, did not even react to it. It just continued sucking out his blood. All Sunny achieved was sending a wave of pain rolling through his body.

'Not good…'

Instantly summoning the Midnight Shard, he enhanced its edge with the help of the shadow and hacked at the leech, putting all his strength behind the strike. The blade of the tachi was as sharp as a razor, and with the augmentation provided by shadow, it…

…Slid helplessly off the leech's skin, not leaving even a scratch on it. The slug wasn't affected at all. It was still drinking his blood,

consuming a dangerous amount of it with each second.

Sunny stared at the disgusting creature, dumbfounded. His body was already starting to suffer from blood loss, a sickening weakness slowly spreading through it. There wasn't much time left until it would cause him to lose consciousness.

And then, inevitably, die.

'Think, think…'

The leech had broken through his tier-five awakened armor without any effort. It was immune to the damage done by the Midnight Shard, which had never failed to cut down any monster he faced before. This could only mean one thing.

The damn slug was a Fallen Beast.

Sunny blinked in disbelief.

'That thing is a Fallen One? Are you kidding me?'

If this was true, then nothing he could do would harm the leech. Maybe if he was at the very peak of his rank, there would be a chance. But with his core mostly empty and his Aspect Ability focused on versatility as opposed to pure might, like Effie's, there was none.

The gap between their ranks was just too wide.

…Stone Saint could probably wound it. But it would take several seconds for the taciturn monster to appear and take action. Seconds that Sunny didn't have. By the time she was able to do anything, he would already be dead, either sucked dry by the abominable slug or crushed to death by the Lord of the Dead.

That left Sunny with only one option. If he couldn't get rid of the leech…

He was going to have to cut off his arm.

Maybe Nephis would be able to grow him a new one.

Or not. In any case, he had to do it in order to survive...

Raising the tachi over his head, Sunny gritted his teeth and hesitated for a moment. Despite understanding that this was the only way, he was still struggling with the idea of crippling himself so terribly.

'Don't think! If you want to live, just do it!'

With a desperate resolve, he forcefully brought the Midnight Shard down… but then stopped it at the last second. The sharp blade hovered mere centimeters away from his skin.

This was not due to the lack of determination, but because Sunny noticed a subtle change happening to the leech.

Its belly, which had been expanding rapidly as his blood filled it, stopped ballooning at some point. Now, strange spasms were running through it.

'What the…'

In the next moment, the vile creature suddenly convulsed. Letting go of his arm, it dropped to the ground and writhed in agony. Through the translucent film of its skin, Sunny could see the innards of the giant slug bursting open. It was as though it was being torn from within by some invisible force.

No, not a force… it was being killed by his blood. The damn leech got poisoned by it.

…It seemed that Blood Weave was far more odd and tenacious of an Attribute than he had thought.

A second later, the whole body of the Fallen Beast simply ruptured, spilling blood everywhere. Sunny stared at it with a blank expression.

Bringing him out of the daze, the voice of the Spell whispered:

[You have slain a Fallen Beast, Corpse Eater.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

'Huh.'

[You have received a Memory.]

As his eyes grew wide, Sunny shook off his astonishment and lunged forward. He still had to escape from this damn place.

Grabbing the bloodied soul shard from the eviscerated remains of the abominable leech, he turned around and sprinted to the golden rope.

Dodging a bone tentacle that burst from the body of the gargantuan tyrant to pursue him, Sunny rolled on the ground, jumped over a pile of broken bones, and finally reached his destination.

As soon as he grabbed the rope, it began contracting, bringing him out of the underground chamber.

When Sunny was nearly reaching the hand of the stone goddess, a deafening roar thundered from below, washing over his body in an almost palpable wave.

The Lord of the Dead was finally awake.

But it was already too late. His prey had escaped.

***

Climbing out of the mud, Sunny fell to his knees, and then tiredly lowered himself to the ground. The breath was escaping from his lungs with laborious, raspy sounds.

Weak. He felt so weak. And tired.

But it was so good to see the sun again…

The wounds he had received in the catacombs had finally caught up with Sunny. With adrenaline gone, he was now in a sea of pain. A quiet groan escaped from his lips.

'That... that was not fun.'

While Sunny was contemplating this, a shadow fell over him. Looking

up, he saw Nephis glaring at him with a dark expression. She was bloodied and battered, with a deep frown contorting the graceful lines of her usually calm face.

"...What?"

Kneeling beside Sunny, Changing Star grimaced and said:

"Are you insane? Why did you do that?"

He tried to chuckle, but ended up twisting in an excruciating coughing fit. When Sunny was finally able to breathe again, he said weakly:

"Yes, no? Maybe. I don't know. I just… saw something shiny."

With that, he opened his fist and showed Changing Star the glowing crystal of the ascended soul shard he had scavenged from the corpse of the vile blood-sucking leech.

She stared at it for a few moments, and then sighed.

Without saying anything else, Nephis placed her cool hands on his chest and closed her eyes.

A moment later, the purifying white flame spread through his body like a warm embrace, repairing any damage done to it.

Even knowing how much pain this cost her, Sunny couldn't help but be happy to feel its touch again.

Soon, his pain disappeared.

With his head cleared of the fog, he realized that they had done it.

They had successfully escaped the Dark City.

Who knew it would be so hard?

Chapter-204: Mysterious Key

A while later, they were resting in the shadow of the giant statue. Every member of the cohort looked nothing short of terrible, however, beneath the bloodied clothes and broken armor, their bodies were whole and sound.

Changing Star had healed them all, and now, she was the only one who was weak and exhausted. Using the white flame so much had taken a heavy toll on her.

Sitting in the mud, Sunny raised his head and looked at the giant statue of the faceless woman. She was just like the last time he had seen her, slender and graceful, with her light flowing robe rippling in the wind, as though made out of actual fabric and not hard stone.

The statue was tilted slightly to the side, with its one remaining hand reaching high into the sky. A long time ago, on the night of their harrowing escape from the Ashen Barrow, Sunny, Cassie and Nephis had taken shelter in her palm.

It was from its height that he had first seen the walls of the Dark City.

Looking down, Sunny stared at the other hand of the giant statue, which had broken off a long time ago and fell down, crushing through the dome of the underground chamber.

With a sigh, he closed his eyes and thought:

'Thank you for saving us again.'

Then, his face darkened.

Remembering the events that had transpired in the catacombs, Sunny felt his good mood evaporating. Although he had found the answer to one of the mysteries that had been plaguing him for a while now, he

wasn't happy about it.

The fate of the inhabitants of the ancient city had always been something that Sunny was very curious about. As an amateur explorer who spent most of his free time studying the ruins of the Dark City, he was familiar with subtle details of their culture more than most. Learning about the mundane facts of their lives was somewhat of a passion of his.

He had known that the history of this ancient civilization ended in tragedy, of course. A cataclysmic disaster had destroyed it, turning the once prosperous land into the desolate hell it was today. But against all logic, Sunny still hoped that these people had somehow managed to survive.

Perhaps they had migrated somewhere, leaving the ruins of their city behind.

But now he knew that it wasn't so. All of them were right there below him, buried forever in a damp underground chamber, piled onto each other high enough to form a ghastly mountain of bones. More than that, their remains had been soaked in the cursed waters of the dark sea and turned into a vessel for the soul of a vile Nightmare Creature.

There were a lot of questions about the fate of these people still lingering in his mind. How did they end up in that dark chamber? Had they died there, or had their bodies been brought there by someone… or something… later? How was the Lord of the Dead born? Was its inception the same as that of the Soul Devourer?

But he didn't really want to know the answers anymore. He felt that learning them would only break his heart.

With a sigh, Sunny decided to distract himself from these depressing thoughts with something uplifting and summoned the runes.

One cluster, in particular, interested him the most.

Shadow Fragments: [322/1000.]

He had received four fragments for killing the Corpse Eater… even though the manner of its death was rather peculiar. Having now

killed Nightmare Creatures of the Awakened, Fallen, and Great ranks, Sunny could surmise that his initial theory was right.

The Spell gave him double the fragments for killing enemies of higher ranks, according to the number of soul cores they possessed. An Awakened creature would land him two fragments for each core, a Fallen one four, and a Great one sixteen.

It was easy to guess that killing a dormant creature, which was equal to him in terms of rank, would result in one fragment per core, while killing a corrupted one would result in eight.

Made sense. It was the same as absorbing soul shards, with the difference being that shadow fragments entered his core at the moment of the kill and without making a distinction between Nightmare Creatures and humans.

Looking up, he glanced at the list of his Memories.

Memories: [Silver Bell], [Puppeteer's Shroud], [Midnight Shard], [Ordinary Rock], [Prowling Thorn], [Endless Spring], [Blood Arrow].

The last one was new. Slightly intrigued, Sunny read its description.

Memory: [Blood Arrow].

Memory Rank: Ascended.

Memory Tier: I.

Memory Type: Weapon.

Memory Description: [A debt of blood must be paid in blood.]

Memory Enchantments: [Rain of Blood], [Restitution].

Enchantment Description: [The arrows are created from the wielder's blood, and as such, can rain on the enemies for as long as the archer has any left in their veins.]

Enchantment Description: [If the arrow finds its mark, it will drink the blood of the prey and restore that which had been taken from the

archer. If it misses, the archer's blood will be lost forever.]

'Huh. Creepy.'

Since Sunny didn't know how to use a bow, this Memory was useless to him. Which was a real shame, because it was the first Ascended one he had ever received. Memories of that rank were extremely rare on the Forgotten Shore.

He could either feed it to the Stone Saint for a couple of shadow fragments, or…

Sunny glanced at Kai and frowned, lost in thought. While the Blood Arrow was of no use to him, it would be a real boon for the charming archer. With it at his disposal, he wouldn't have to carry a quiver with him, not to mention that each shot he made would be much more devastating.

…As long as Kai didn't miss, of course. If he did miss, he would be sacrificing his blood for nothing.

Transfering the Blood Arrow to Kai would have made the cohort much stronger. But Sunny wasn't sure that he was ready to give up his first and only Ascended Memory. Not for free, at least.

Torn, he dismissed the runes and decided to think about it later.

In other news, the Blood Weave had revealed a new trait. Turns out, Sunny's blood was poisonous — or rather, damaging to anyone who ingested it. At least it seemed that way from the manner of Corpse Eater's death. He would have to experiment to find out more later...

Or not. Honestly, Sunny didn't even know how one would go about checking something like that, and wasn't particularly eager to find out.

After dismissing the runes, Sunny finally decided to take a look at the mysterious key. Subtly glancing around, he furtively took it out from beneath the vambrace of the Puppeteer's Shroud, where he had hidden it earlier.

The intricate iron key lay on his palm, glowing with a pale golden

light.

The light of divinity.

Sunny had no idea what the key was supposed to open.

He had taken an insane risk and almost died to get it. Was it worth it?

Honestly, he wasn't sure.

But deep down, Sunny felt that it was. For some reason, he sensed that the small iron key would turn out to be extremely important to him.

Chapter-205: Journey to the South

Sadly, the cohort did not get a lot of time to rest. Despite the fact that it wasn't even noon yet, they had a lot of ground to cover before sunset.

The plan they had made at the start of the day was to leave the Dark City from the south by climbing the wall near the grandiose Main Gates and then travel through the Labyrinth to the next safe height, which was about ten kilometers away.

However, due to the fact that they had ended up in the catacombs instead and had to escape through the chamber belonging to the Lord of the Dead, the party was now to the east of the ruins, near the beautiful statue of the faceless woman.

Not only did they have to circle around the city now, but there was also less time to reach safety before the flood of darkness devoured the Forgotten Shore once again.

Standing up in a chorus of disappointed groans, the cohort assumed the marching formation and set out south. Walking through the mud of the colossal crater was not easy, but for the time being, they had no other choice… unless they wanted to scale the monumental stone wall and return to the Dark City, of course.

Luckily, with both Sunny's shadow and Kai scouting the way ahead, they didn't have to worry about being ambushed by monsters. So, for the time being, the only thing the party had to struggle with was moving their feet through the wet dirt.

The monotonous silence was broken only by laborious breathing and slurping of mud.

…A while later, the impregnable and seemingly endless grey wall that loomed some distance away and above them slowly twisted, drifting away from the edge of the crater.

They were finally leaving the cursed ruins behind.

Turning around, Sunny looked back and studied the sight of the city that had been his whole world for these past four… almost five months.

Far away, the floor of the gargantuan crater sharply rose, forming a tall slope. On it stood the unassailable wall of polished grey stone, firm and unyielding despite the thousands of years that had passed since the demise of its creators.

From where he stood, Sunny could see the flood of crimson coral swelling at its base, sharp blades powerlessly scraping against the cold stone in hopeless attempts to find purchase. It looked as though the city was being besieged by the land itself.

'If it knew what awaits inside, the Labyrinth would be trying to escape as far as possible from that damned place instead.'

With a sigh, Sunny looked up and noticed a lone human figure standing on the wall, watching them disappear into the distance. That figure was crooked and dark, emanating a cold feeling of foreboding.

A few moments later, it turned away and disappeared from view.

Harus had chosen to return to the Bright Castle.

Trying not to shiver, Sunny lingered for a few seconds, and then hurried to catch up with the group.

They were safe from him, at least…

'For now.'

***

Because the crater was too big, the bend of its edge was almost

imperceptible. Only by looking far into the distance could one say that it was actually curved. Because of this, the cohort could have continued traveling through the crater for a long time without having to move farther away from the goal of today's journey, which lay to the southwest of their current position.

However, they had to leave the crater and return to the Labyrinth sooner or later — not only to escape the black water, but also because there was nothing to hide behind on this vast muddy plain. If any flying Nightmare Creature decided to attack them from above, the cohort would have no defense against it.

The Labyrinth, while hiding its own fair share of terrifying threats, at least offered some measure of protection.

That's why, at some point, Nephis led the party to the sharp slope of the crater, and the six of them climbed out of it. With the help of Kai and the trusty golden rope, the task wasn't hard at all.

For some time after that, they walked on the ridge separating the crater from the Labyrinth proper, but then, finally, had to turn west and enter the maze of crimson coral.

Sunny couldn't help but sigh once the familiar coral walls surrounded him once again. He didn't miss the first months of his infernal voyage into the Dream Realm at all.

Well… maybe a little. But not because of the damn Labyrinth itself, that's for sure.

The crimson forest was simultaneously the same and vastly different from the region of it that he had traveled through before.

The coral maze itself was pretty much identical to how it had been east of the gargantuan crater. However, the creatures populating it in these parts were vastly different.

There were no members of the carapace legion around, at least not anywhere Sunny could see. Instead, the dominant tribe of Nightmare Creatures in this region seemed to consist of nasty, spider-like critters that had a habit of decorating the walls and passages of the Labyrinth

with endless amounts of grey, incredibly sticky cobwebs.

What's worse, their web seemed to be made not out of spider silk, but out of thin metal wires that were as tough as iron and could cut the victim into little pieces if it thrashed too much after getting caught.

Needless to say, getting yourself stuck in these webs was tantamount to a death sentence.

The deeper into the Labyrinth they went, the more of these cobwebs surrounded them. It came to the point where they had to use Cassie's flying rapier to clear the path ahead every few minutes, slowing down the speed of the cohort to a crawl.

During one of these stops, Sunny rubbed his face and thought:

'I just hope that nothing attacks us while we wait.'

Turning to him, the shadow glared for a few moments and then tiredly shook its head. It then placed one palm across its face a looked down, as if defeated.

'...What? What did I say?'

A moment later, several massive spider-like creatures jumped out of the cracks in the coral and attacked them.

Chapter-206: Triumph

The spiders were about the size of a human, incredibly fast, and had plates of something that resembled iron covering parts of their repulsive bodies. They looked like armored battle machines created for the sole purpose of slaughtering living things.

They also looked strangely familiar. With a little effort, Sunny realized that these abominations looked a lot like lesser, much smaller versions of the giant Fallen Beasts that had destroyed the original Stone Saint and her kin.

It's just that their size and armor weren't nearly as formidable.

If so…

'I have bad news for you, fools.'

As soon as the spiders attacked, the members of the cohort reacted with the deadly calmness of experienced Dark City hunters. Weapons flashed in the air, severing limbs and piercing through iron as though it was paper. Effie straight up flattened one of the creatures with a devastating strike of her battered shield. The poor beast didn't even have time to understand what a huge mistake it had made.

The others were no less efficient. Sunny himself threw the Prowling Thorn and pulled on the invisible string as soon as it sunk into the flesh of one of the spiders, bringing its jump to an abrupt end and sending it crashing to the ground. Before the beast could stand up, Quiet Dancer streaked through the air and pierced its head clean through.

Just a few short seconds after the spiders had tried to ambush the group of humans, the battle was over. Three dead Nightmare Creatures were sprawled in the mud, while the fourth one ended up pinned to a coral wall with several arrows.

They could have even shaved a second or two if it weren't for the need to look out for the spiderwebs.

Sunny shook his head.

'Disappointing.'

Wait.. why was he disappointed? Great! This was great! Not every victory had to almost cost him his life.

If there was one thing to feel disappointed about, it was that this one was so swift that he had not even gotten the chance to finish any of the enemies himself, thus not receiving any rewards from the Spell. But even then, he would be glad to only fight easy battles like this in the future.

Nephis cleaned the blade of her sword with a piece of cloth, listened to the silence for a few moments to make sure that nothing else was going to attack them, and then gave the cohort a go-ahead to start dressing the monsters down.

Soon, soul shards, strips of meat and other useful parts were cut, cleaned, and put into Effie's enchanted bag. Everything was done with efficient speed and professionalism that could only come from a lot of experience.

Sunny could only shake his head again.

They were able to dispose of the iron spiders with such ease because of two reasons. First, as far as Nightmare Creatures went, these ones were not on the same level as, for example, carapace scavengers. They had a slight advantage in speed, but were not nearly as strong, agile, and ridiculously tough.

If Sunny could guess, he would say that the iron spiders relied heavily on their webs and battlefield advantage to defeat the prey. Because the cohort had destroyed the webs in advance, their main advantage was gone.

The second reason was the cohort itself. They were some of the deadliest humans on the Forgotten Shore. Sunny was sure that at least four of them could kill a Pathfinder of the Host in single

combat… if not one of the lieutenants themselves.

They were the best and the brightest the outer settlement could offer, after all. Effie had been right when she said that there had never been such a powerful cohort outside the walls of the Bright Castle before.

All in all, the six of them were more than equipped to handle just three awakened beasts. The Labyrinth was going to really try harder if it wished to see them dead.

Sunny chuckled.

"Just" three awakened beasts… yeah. How crazy did this sound?

And yet, it was true.

Finishing up with the dead spiders, the cohort indifferently left their eviscerated bodies behind and continued on their way.

***

After several more minor skirmishes with the iron spiders, they had finally reached their destination. Not too far away from them, colored pink by the evening sun, a magnificent arch of white marble rose high above the sea of crimson coral.

The giant structure was clearly created by the same people who had built the Bright Castle, and made from the same stone. It looked like a much larger sibling of the pristine arch that guarded the entrance to the white road which climbed all the way to the outer settlement.

Only this one was much more weathered, bleak, and damaged. Signs of corrosion and deep cracks covered its surface, with one of its sides being partially collapsed.

Sunny studied the arch and looked at Nephis:

"This is our stop for the night?"

She gave him a simple nod and said after a short pause:

"We need to pick up our pace. The night is close, and we might have to fight to clear the top of it."

Sunny sighed. Fighting again… when would they finally be able to rest? It had been such a long day.

However, he kept his mouth shut. Changing Star was the most tired out of all of them… due to healing all their wounds, no less. And he didn't see her complaining.

So it wasn't his place.

To his left, Effie suddenly cursed and groaned:

"More fighting? Come on! When are we finally going to eat?"

Sunny blinked.

'Well… that works, too, I guess.'

Staring at the huntress, Nephis shook her head and silently walked forward.

Soon, they reached the giant arch. Kai summoned his bow and flew up, only to return a few minutes later and report that no terrible monster was nesting on top of the ancient structure.

With sighs of relief, the members of the cohort climbed the golden rope one after another and were soon standing far above the Labyrinth, silently watching as the flood of black water drowned it in the lightless depths.

As the sun disappeared beyond the horizon, they were left on a rectangular island made out of white marble. All around it, there was nothing but the undulating waves of the dark sea.

Sunny was once again surrounded from all sides by nothing but darkness and black water. He did not like the feeling.

Chapter-207: Beach Episode

The night passed with no incidents. In the morning, Sunny was woken up by the sound of the surging waves and opened his eyes to see the sun slowly rising from beyond the horizon.

Rubbing his face, he sat up and looked around, noticing that most of the cohort was still asleep. Only Kai, who had been the last one to stand watch, was awake, sitting on the edge of the arch and admiring the dawn with a dreamy look on his face.

Sunny wanted to call out to him and warn the charming archer not to sit this close to the edge, but then remembered that Kai could fly.

'Yeah. Like I would forget it again!'

Using the opportunity, he dove into the Soul Sea and summoned Stone Saint from the depths of the Shadow Core, where she was sleeping in the embrace of nurturing black flames. Just like before, the Shadow did not appear from a sphere of light like an Echo would, but stepped out from a whirlpool of dark fire.

Then, she stood motionlessly in front of Sunny like an actual statue, seemingly indifferent both to his presence and the wounds covering her body.

Sunny walked around the Stone Saint, studying the extent of damage done to her by the undead horde. The armor of the taciturn knight was battered and broken, pierced in several places by the claws of the countless skeletons she had fought. The ruby dust wasn't flowing from the breaches anymore, but he could see deep gashes on her smooth, grey skin.

'Bastards.'

Who dares to hurt his Shadow?

Shaking his head, Sunny dismissed the Saint, sending her back into the restorative darkness of the Shadow Core.

The damage, while extensive, was not really threatening to her existence. In a couple of days, his pet monster should fully recover.

In fact, she already looked better than she had yesterday.

Leaving the Soul Sea, Sunny inhaled the fresh air, lingered for a few moments, and then turned to Kai:

"Hey, Night. Are you stupid? Don't sit this close to the edge!"

The charming archer looked at him and raised an eyebrow.

"I can fly, remember? If I fall…"

Sunny scoffed.

"I'm not worried about you falling into the cursed sea. I am worried about something dragging you off into it. That'd be terrible, right?"

Quite happy with himself, he grinned and turned away.

'What a nice way to start the day…'

***

Because everyone needed some time to rest and recuperate, they decided to spend a day on the marble arch and continue their journey tomorrow.

As the result, Sunny was currently staring at the sight that wasn't really funny, but filled him with mirth nevertheless.

Back in the real world, when he had time to consume some entertainment, Sunny had noticed a certain popular trope. In most dramas, webtoons, and cartoons aimed at young boys and teenagers, the heroes would inevitably end up spending a day at the beach during their adventures.

He didn't quite know why such a trope existed, but suspected that it

was just an excuse to show the female characters in nothing but revealing swimsuits.

Not that he had anything against it…

In any case, Sunny had never imagined that he was going to end up in such an episode himself one day.

'This is… simply hilarious!'

Barely holding himself from laughing out loud, Sunny glanced at his companions.

Because everyone's armor and weapons were damaged during the battle in the catacombs, they had to keep these Memories inside the Soul Sea for a bit of time to allow them to restore themselves — just like Stone Saint was currently doing in the depths of his Shadow Core.

As the result, all of them — including Sunny himself — were currently wearing nothing except for some loincloths and, in the case of the girls, makeshift brassieres.

Provided, these crude undergarments weren't really swimsuits, and the marble arch could barely be considered a beach even at night… but still, the situation was funnily similar.

They were all half-naked and relaxing in the middle of a something that someone could call an adventure, so it was close enough.

'Ha!'

He was in a rather good mood.

Everyone was busy doing their thing. There was a fire in the middle of the arch, with roasting meat filling the air with an appetizing aroma. Effie was tending to it.

The tan and lean body of the muscular huntress looked like it was cut from stone, as if she was a sculpture of an ancient goddess come to life. Sunny tried to count her abs and got distracted halfway through by… uh… not so stonelike parts of her robust figure.

After a couple of seconds of thoughtless bliss, Sunny had to hurriedly look away. The last thing he wanted was…

'Pure thoughts!'

Nephis was helping Effie with the breakfast. Next to the vigorous huntress, her figure seemed especially slender and lithe. However, she was also extremely athletic in appearance. Her ivory skin was pleasantly contrasted against the olive skin of their boisterous pathfinder.

'What a sight to behold...'

Uh… from a purely aesthetic standpoint, of course.

Seeing Changing Star like that reminded Sunny of the early days of their stay in the Dream Realm. Things had been much simpler back then.

Suddenly wistful, he looked away and checked what Cassie was doing. The blind girl was resting near the fire, wrapped in her beautiful cloak. With her delicate features and small stature, she looked extremely lovely.

And then… there were Kai and Caster.

Sunny sighed and looked down at his own scrawny body. Honestly, after all these months spent hunting monsters, eating meat and absorbing shadow fragments, he looked much better than he used to. In fact, by human standards, he was nothing short of… well, above average.

Even as far as Awakened went, he could probably compete with some in the looks department.

…But those two specimens were simply on another level!

Kai was tall and shaped like a young god, with lean muscles rolling under his flawless skin and a svelte figure that begged to be sculpted into a marble masterpiece. Sunny could swear that even sunlight was attracted to him, illuminating the charming archer in just a way to make him look as gorgeous as possible.

Currently, Kai was tending to his arrows, somehow managing to make even that simple task look glamorous.

Caster was much the same, with a perfect body and broad shoulders that simply screamed of power, appeal and potency. With a darker skin to match his gallant and manly image, he was basically the epitome of masculinity. This was contrasted by a handsome, but gentle face and humorous green eyes, creating a rather tempting visage.

Sunny grimaced and turned away.

'You know what? To hell with this beach day nonsense! Let's do something productive…'

Chapter-208: Something Productive

Walking over to Kai, Sunny cleared his throat and forced himself to not cover his eyes. The damn archer was just too dazzling. Him being shirtless in crowded places should have honestly been categorized as a public hazard back in the real world.

If not, there was a gross oversight.

'I wonder how he was made. Probably in a secret government laboratory or a magic cauldron of some sort. I mean, there's no way that this dude is the same species as me… right?'

After a few seconds of Sunny blankly staring at him, Kai smiled politely:

"Uh, Sunny? Did you want something?"

Sunny flinched and covered his eyes.

"Ah! Don't smile at me!"

Kai blinked.

"...Alright."

Breathing heavily, Sunny glared at him and slowly lowered his hand.

"That's better. And yes, I did want something."

Kai suddenly livened up and pointed at his chest.

"What is that? An accessory?"

'What is he…'

Lowering his gaze, Sunny noticed the mysterious key hanging on a thread tied around his neck.

He didn't really want to show it to anyone, but with the Puppeteer's Shroud restoring itself in the Soul Sea, there were not a lot of places where he could hide it.

None that he was willing to use, at least...

Plus, no one else was supposed to be able to see the light of divinity, so to them, it just looked like a small iron key.

Sunny frowned.

"It's not an accessory. It's a key. "

Kai hesitated.

"Oh. What does it open?"

Sunny shrugged.

"How should I know?"

The charming archer seemed a little confused.

"But if it's not an accessory and it doesn't open anything, why are you carrying it around?"

His questions were starting to get tiresome. Sunny sighed.

"To open something, of course!"

Kai scratched his nose.

"But you just said that you don't know what it opens."

Sunny gritted his teeth.

"It's a damn key, right?! So it has to open something! I just carry it around in case I find something that can be opened by that damned key! What's so hard to understand?!"

The beautiful archer gave him a strange look.

"Oh… I see. That definitely makes sense."

'Curses! That's not how I planned to approach him…'

Sunny instantly changed his expression and looked at Kai with a wide smile.

...The sudden shift looked sort of creepy.

"Uh, what I wanted to say, Night, my dear friend… we are friends, right? Anyway, what I wanted to say was that I hope that this answer satisfies your curiosity. That's something a friend would say… right?"

The charming young man gave him a dubious look.

"I guess?"

Sunny made his smile wider, feeling his face hurt a little.

"Great! So we are friends. Well, some might say that it's your lucky day, buddy. Because today — and only today, probably! — Sunny's Gorgeous Emporium offers customers an exclusive friendship deal. Just for friends of the establishment.

Aren't you lucky?"

Kai suddenly coughed.

"...Wasn't it Sunny's Brilliant Emporium last time?"

Sunny blinked.

"Was it? Well, doesn't matter. The deal still stands. Are you interested or not?"

The archer lingered for a few moments, and then cautiously said:

"But Sunny… you still haven't told me what exactly that deal entails. Is it a deal for customers you consider friends or are you trying to sell me your "friendship"? Or wait, do you want to buy mine? Or both? Ah, I'm confused."

As if waiting for that response, Sunny nodded energetically.

"Yes! I'm glad that you asked. In fact, I have an incredible item that I want to sell. It's so incredible that I am even reluctant to part with it. But since you are my friend, I am willing to give it away. Practically for free.

Full friendship discount, just for you. No need to thank me, really."

Attracted by the noise, the others left what they were doing and were now staring at the two of them. Effie got distracted from preparing meat and was now observing the circus with an expectant grin.

Realizing that he is now the center of attention, Kai sighed.

"Alright, I'll bite. What is that incredible item you want to sell me?"

Sunny remained silent for a few moments, and then suddenly stopped smiling.

"Oh, just something I had gathering dust in my Soul Sea. It's a Memory that can serve as an endless supply of arrows. As long as you don't miss."

The beautiful archer's eyes suddenly lit up. He glanced at his quiver and said:

"Wait… really? You really have such a Memory?"

After thinking about it for a long time, Sunny had decided to give the Blood Arrow to Kai. Having the archer of their cohort armed with it would make a lot of things easier during this journey.

He could potentially earn himself a bow in the future and learn how to use it, but it wouldn't be anytime soon. Plus, with how dangerous the enchantments of the Blood Arrow were, nothing short of excellence would fly. And excellence took a lot of time to achieve, time that he didn't have. So, giving it to a skilled archer like Kai was a better decision.

Their recent encounters with the iron spiders only made Sunny more certain that this was the right thing to do.

But he wasn't going to give it away for free.

"Yes, I do have such a Memory."

Then, he casually added:

"Oh, did I forget to say? It can provide an endless supply of arrows, and also all those arrows will be of the Ascended rank."

A grave silence settled over the marble arch.

"You… you're in possession of an Ascended Memory?"

That question was asked by Caster. Kai didn't have to ask, because he already knew that Sunny was telling the truth.

His eyes slightly widened.

On the Forgotten Shore, Ascended Memories were exceedingly rare — for an obvious reason. Sleepers could only get one by defeating a Fallen Nightmare Creature, and there weren't a lot of people capable of such a feat. Added to that was the fact that not every kill provided a Memory. In fact, most didn't.

To receive one was the dream of every inhabitant of the Dark City.

Sunny shrugged.

"Oh, I have a couple. Why?"

…The other being the onyx armor. Which was broken and useless. But they didn't need to know that, honestly.

He grinned.

"Only the best wares in the Sunny's Astonishing Emporium! Wait, uh… was it astonishing? Ah, who cares. You get the sentiment."

Caster shook his head.

"How did you get an Ascended Memory? You?"

The grin froze on Sunny's face. When he spoke a few moments later,

all humor was gone from his voice, replaced by coldness.

"Well, if you have to know. I got it by killing a Fallen Beast. Before you ask... this time, I didn't have to shake my finger or spit. I just looked at it, and it died."

Then, he turned his head and looked straight at Caster:

"I am very proficient in killing things, you know."

Chapter-209: Fireside Banter

In the end, Kai agreed to his deal. In exchange for the Blood Arrow, he gave Sunny the two weaker arrows he had.

Sunny fed them to the Stone Saint, bringing her amount of shadow fragments to twenty-nine. That was two more than she had in the past, which meant that he received the same amount of fragments that he would have gotten by feeding her the Blood Arrow itself.

He didn't really gain anything, but also didn't lose anything. Kai was the one who really profited from their exchange.

So Sunny didn't lie when he said that it was an incredible deal.

After breakfast, which transpired in somewhat awkward silence, Sunny sprawled on the ground and smiled happily.

"You know, guys. These past few weeks made me realize something. Actually, it was all thanks to Kai, who introduced me... introduced me... uh... to Stev."

Effie stretched, making Sunny stutter and lose the train of thought for a second, then smiled with satisfaction and glanced at him.

"Really? And what is that?"

Sunny hesitated for a few moments and said:

"When I was a little kid, I loved reading webtoons about the Awakened. You know, the ones where they always explore ancient ruins, battle Nightmare Creatures, and grow more powerful with each victory."

He chuckled.

"The hero and his cohort decide on an adventure, vanquish evil, gain

mighty Memories, then return to the real world and sell their spoils at the adventurer shop. They spend their money to upgrade their equipment, and immediately set out on a more epic and dangerous adventure."

Cassie smiled.

"I loved to read those too."

Sunny glanced at her and sighed.

"Yeah. But when I got older, I couldn't help but think — what are they thinking about? Exploring ancient ruins is not a wise thing to do. In fact, only crazy people would do it. No matter how good you are, sooner or later, you will meet something more terrifying than any human can handle and die. If this was real life, why would all those adventurers go into the ruins over and over again?"

The blind girl tilted her head and opened her mouth, but then closed it again.

Sunny smiled.

"But then it hit me! They were not doing it to vanquish evil. They were doing it to collect a wide variety of powerful Memories. You see, the real dream is not to be the hero, one of their companions, or even the love interest. The real dream is to be the owner of the shop where the hero sells his trophies and buys new equipment! That way you can live a pretty life without risking your neck.

That's the real goal."

He crossed his arms and added:

"After a few short years of adventuring around the Dream Realm and collecting Memories, you can retire, open a shop, and live comfortably for the rest of your life. All you need is to sell a Memory once every couple of years. Maybe make some money off the younger, less fortunate adventurers, too."

Kai laughed and looked at Sunny with curiosity.

"So… say that we somehow manage to return to the real world and become true Awakened. Is this what you're going to do?"

Sunny thought about it for a few moments and shrugged.

"I don't know. I don't really have a lot to do in the real world, apart from compiling all the things I've learned about the Forgotten Shore into a report and giving it to a teacher who was kind to me back at the Academy. So… maybe? I don't have enough Memories yet to open a real store, though."

He glanced at the charming archer and smiled.

"What about you? What is the thing you really want to do if you return to the real world?"

Kai suddenly turned away with a look of embarrassment on his face.

"Oh... I don't know. I haven't really thought about it."

But after several seconds, he suddenly said in a shy voice:

"...Avatar Singer."

Sunny blinked.

"A what?"

The archer hesitated for a while, and then explained:

"Avatar Singer is a music competition show. Popular singers compete with each other, but the twist is that they are all using the stock VR avatars to perform. So the judges can only evaluate their voices and skill. They only learn the singer's identity after."

Effie giggled.

"Why would you want to hide your pretty face, Night? It's your best feature!"

Kai was silent for a few moments, and then smiled gently.

"I just… I just think that it would be nice, to be judged based on my

skill and talent alone, with nothing else getting in the way. Also, that would be such a great way to announce my return to the fans! Just imagine… they would be so excited! That would be a perfect media storm."

Sunny shook his head. It seemed that Kai was really a celebrity. Talking about things like fan reactions and media storms with a straight face… did he even hear himself?

But it was a nice dream, at least. Better than his own stupid desires, by far.

Turning to Effie, he asked:

"What about you? What would you do in the real world?"

The huntress grinned.

"I don't even have to think about it. I would go eat chicken wings… the real ones. And then start preparing myself for the Second Nightmare. Pretty simple."

Everybody grew silent. After a while, Cassie said:

"Are you sure that you want to challenge another Nightmare?"

Effie shrugged.

"I have my reasons. So yes. For me, that is the only choice."

The blind girl was quiet for a bit, and then said:

"I would go and spend time with my mom and dad. That's the thing I want to do most in the real world."

Caster glanced at her and courtly nodded.

"I agree with Cassie. Family is the most important. When I come back, I will greet my father and look him in the eyes with pride, knowing that I did not let our clan down. Then, I will try to do everything in my power to grow as fast as possible, to relieve him of his worries and propel our bloodline to new heights."

'How very… Legacy-like of him.'

Finally turning to Nephis, Sunny looked at her with a subtly dark expression and asked:

"How about you, Neph? What are you going to do when you return to the real world?"

Changing Star was silent for a while, looking into the distance with a calm expression.

Then, she sighed and answered in a quiet voice:

"I would go visit my mom, too."

Everyone grew silent. Sunny blinked, a little confused.

"Wait. Your mom? I thought she was dead."

Nephis lingered for a bit, and then turned her face away.

"She is. Technically."

Chapter-210: Shadow of the Past

'Technically dead? What does she mean?'

Sunny glanced at the others and saw that they, too, were confused. Everyone except for Caster, that is, who seemed like he knew something.

A few moments passed in tense silence, which was broken by Changing Star's sigh. Looking at them, she said evenly:

"My mother is one of the Hollow. She became Hollow while pregnant with me, actually. So I never really met her. Just her… body."

Nephis grew silent. After a while, a strange smile appeared on her face.

"It's funny, really. When my grandmother was still alive, I made a point of treating that body as nothing but a corpse. But once she passed away and we were the only ones left… well. I found myself getting a bit confused."

Nephis shrugged and turned away once again.

"Anyway, before leaving for the First Nightmare, I used what little money there was left of our estate to buy her a VIP spot in a specialized Hollow care facility. They are treating her really well. But still… I don't like the idea of her being alone there. So when I return, that's what I'm going to do. Visit her."

No one said anything, heavily affected by her words.

Sunny stared at Changing Star, trying to imagine what it must have felt like, growing up in the company of your parent's soulless shell. With death staring at you through those empty eyes every day, always looming over you like a dark shadow... both of your past and

your future.

Maybe that was a part of the reason why Neph hated the Spell so much.

Sensing the heaviness in the air, Changing Star glanced at them and smiled darkly.

"What? Is this your first time meeting a hollowborn? Well, I can't blame you. Creatures of my breed are pretty rare. In fact, even I have never met another one."

Then, she sighed and stretched her legs, moving them closer to the fire.

"So yeah, that and dye my hair. These are the things I would do in the real world first."

Sunny blinked.

"...Dye your hair?"

Nephis nodded.

'How is that a priority?'

Feeling that he was missing something, Sunny scratched his head and asked:

"Why?"

She glanced at him in surprise.

"What do you mean, why? I'm not used to it, and it's weird. Do I need another reason?"

He stared at her with a perplexed expression. Noticing it, Changing Star frowned and asked with a tiny hint of amusement in her voice.

"Sunny… did you, perhaps, think that this is my natural hair color?"

He was silent for a while, then opened his mouth and closed it again.

"...It's not?"

Nephis looked at him for a while with a strange expression, and then suddenly exploded with laughter.

Her laugh was melodic, pure, and very pleasant to the ear. With regret, Sunny realized that he had never heard it before.

He wished that their lives were different, so that people could hear Nephis laugh more often. But they weren't, and would probably never be.

After a while, she glanced at him and smiled.

"Sunny, it's silver, for Spell's sake. Who has natural silver hair?"

Luckily, at that point, Kai suddenly came to his rescue:

"Actually, I thought that it's natural too. Ah… it suits you very well, Lady Nephis."

Changing Star turned to him with an expression of utter surprise. Then, she glanced at Effie with a silent question.

The huntress nodded.

"Yeah, me too. I mean… who knows what you Legacies are even made of?"

Nephis blinked a couple of times, then shook her head in bewilderment.

"Well… no, it's not natural. It became like that after my First Nightmare."

Kai leaned forward with curiosity:

"Really? What color was your hair before?"

She shrugged.

"Black. A normal human color."

The charming archer stared at her, and then smiled:

"That would suit you very well too, Lady Nephis. Ah, I can just see it."

However, Sunny couldn't. The idea of Changing Star without her arresting, eye-catching silver hair simply could not fit into his head. Let alone the fact that she was a brunette! How was this even possible?

'That would look so wrong! Right?'

Well… as it turned out, life was full of surprises.

Today, he learned not one, but two entirely new things about the person he had thought he knew the best in the world.

Who would have guessed that this would happen?

'...There might be something else except for skimpy swimsuits to these beach episodes, huh?'

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After that, they spent some time resting and lazily conversing with each other. However, pretty soon, people started to get restless from boredom.

To combat it somehow, Sunny suggested the idea of playing a sports game.

…His motives were not at all dictated by a secret desire to see a bunch of absolutely gorgeous young people jump around and wrestle with each while very lightly dressed. Nope, not one bit.

However, things didn't go as he had envisioned them. Pretty soon, Sunny found himself cursing as he was desperately pulling on the golden rope in a furious match of tug of war.

…Well, it was supposed to be furious. But what was actually transpiring was Effie casually holding the rope with one hand while the four of them — Sunny, Cassie, Kai and Caster — were trying to

move her from the spot with no visible results whatsoever. After a while, the huntress simply pulled on the rope and sent their entire team to the ground.

'That's... that's cheating!'

With a satisfied grin, Effie walked over and towered above him, her arms akimbo. Looking down directly at Sunny, she smirked.

"Weak. When did you lose your spirit, shorty?"

Then, she winked and said in a mischievous tone:

"Back at the cathedral, you were able to perform better. Not to mention last longer…"

Sunny grew bright red and gritted his teeth:

"Shut up! People will misunderstand!"

The huntress looked at him with a shocked expression.

"Mis—misunderstand? What are you… oh!"

Then, she pretended to be horrified and covered her mouth with one hand.

"You… what kind of a degenerate are you?! Training! I meant while you were training!"

While Sunny was staring at her in utter disbelief, his mouth wide open, Effie snorted, then turned away and exploded with laughter. Shaking her head, the boisterous huntress giggled one last time and walked away.

'...No more sports games! Ever! That wretched troublemaker will win them all, anyway!'

He needed to teach himself how to come up with better ideas...

Chapter-211: Game of Lies

With a bit of disappointment, Sunny realized that all types of physical activities were out of the question. Not only because Effie was going to win every damn game, but also because Cassie couldn't participate in most.

If that was the case, they would have to settle for a battle of wit, instead.

After thinking for a while, he made a few preparations and addressed his companions in a mischievous tone:

"Alright, let's have another competition. This time, it will be a challenge for your minds."

Sunny paused for a few moments and then smiled.

"And to spice things up, this time, there will be a prize. The winner will get this!"

With that, he produced the ascended soul shard that he had gotten from the Corpse Eater from behind his back and showed it to everyone. The beautiful crystal shined with an alluring, ethereal light.

Except for Nephis, who was resting with her eyes closed, everyone showed the shard a lot of interest. Sunny grinned.

Of course, they were interested! It was very rare to see one of these, after all.

He didn't really have a use for this thing right now, though. And making the cohort stronger would, in turn, increase his own chances of getting through the expedition alive. So parting with the shard was not that detrimental.

Especially if he could have some fun in return.

Effie was the first one to speak:

"What are the terms of the competition?"

Sunny put the crystal away before answering:

"It's really simple. I'll give you a riddle, and the first person to answer correctly wins. How does that sound?"

The huntress looked at him with doubt and shrugged.

"Sounds boring. But alright, let's play."

Smiling, Sunny commanded the shadow to separate from him and put the Ordinary Rock on it. Then, he turned to Effie and said:

"Listen carefully. Imagine if you will that the two of us, my shadow and I, are in possession of a rare treasure. One of us is an honorable, extremely attractive Awakened that can tell no lie, while the other one is a vile, ugly, stupid devil that would never tell a word of truth. But you don't know which one is which."

Effie grinned.

"I mean… isn't it obvious?"

Sunny blinked.

"Shut up! Also, it's an imaginary situation. Okay? Anyway, you have to find out which one of us is hiding the treasure. If you do, you'll get the treasure. If you don't, the devil will kill you.

You can only ask one question, either to me or the shadow. Understand?"

The huntress giggled and flexed her muscles.

"Can I just beat the answer out of you?"

Sunny observed her vigorous figure for a moment too long, and then smiled.

"You can. Also, you're dead."

Effie stared at him in bewilderment.

"What? Why?!"

He shrugged and glanced in her direction with disdain.

"Did I not tell you that you can only ask one question? Well who told you to ask whether you can beat me up or not? What a stupid way to waste a question!"

While the unruly huntress was throwing daggers at him with her eyes, Sunny turned away and said:

"Next!"

Kai smiled apologetically at Effie and approached him.

"Alright, Night. What's your question? Do consider that our roles might have changed since the last round."

The charming young man gestured at the marble beneath his feet and addressed the shadow:

"What color is the stone I am pointing to?"

Since Sunny had expected such a turn of events, the Ordinary Rock immediately answered in the deepest voice he could muster.

"...White."

Kai looked at Sunny with a triumphant smile and said:

"So… I win? The shadow is obviously the honorable Awakened."

Sunny gave him a nod.

"You indeed learned which one of us is a dirty liar. Surprise... it was me. However, that was not the task. The task was to find out which one of us is hiding the treasure, and you have already used up your only question. So… sorry, buddy, but you're also dead.

I'll miss you very much! In this hypothetical situation..."

The charming archer sighed and looked at him with reproach. Sunny raised his eyebrows.

"What? Why are you looking at me like this? Be grateful that I allowed you to play at all! With your Flaw, you are like a walking cheat as far as this game is concerned."

He scowled, then added:

"In fact, the mere fact that you claim to have a Flaw is an affront to us, truly Flawed people!"

Kai lingered for a bit and walked to the side to sit near Effie. Sunny had to suppress his laugh when he noticed that the boisterous huntress reacted to being this close to the charming young man's deific body pretty much exactly the same as he himself sometimes reacted to her.

'Get your head out of the gutter! Pure thoughts, Effie!'

A wide grin still found its way onto his face. Shaking his head, Sunny turned away to call the next contestant, but Kai suddenly spoke, interrupting him:

"You're not entirely right, you know," he said gently.

Sunny raised an eyebrow.

"About what?"

The archer looked down before answering.

"About my Flaw. Yes, it is not as heavy of a burden as many others have to carry. But it's still a curse."

'What is he talking about? It's almost entirely like a second Aspect Ability!'

Looking at Kai with a doubtful expression, Sunny asked:

"Yeah? How, exactly? Please explain, because I really can't think of a situation where this Flaw of yours could be a burden."

The beautiful young man was silent for a while, and then looked up at Sunny with a sad smile.

"Imagine hearing the person who is the most important to you in the whole wide world telling you that they love you, only to realize that they don't. Imagine listening to your friend's words of encouragement, only to understand that he secretly wishes for you to crash and burn…"

He sighed.

"Ignorance is bliss, Sunny. After returning from my First Nightmare, I had to come to terms with the fact that most of the people in my life were not who I thought they were. And that what hid behind their smiles was ugly and vicious."

Kai gestured to himself and said:

"Because of who I am... and how I am... there was always a whirlpool of people around me. But after learning their true faces, I couldn't… well. Let's just say that, if I had the choice, I would have preferred to stay blissfully blind to the truth forever."

He grew quiet.

'Damn.'

Suddenly, Kai smiled.

"But that's why I enjoy spending time with you so much, Sunny! No matter how bizarre the things you say are, they're always true. I never met anyone as stupidly honest as you. It's very refreshing!"

Sunny shifted uncomfortably.

'Uh… did he just call me stupid?'

Now he was kind of sorry for mocking the charming young man about his Flaw. Perhaps it would be useful to someone like Sunny.

But to a person like Kai, who always attracted the worst kind of attention from people, it could really be incredibly painful.

The Spell knew what it was doing.

It always hit you in your most vulnerable spot.

'Damned Spell. The being that weaved it must have been the worst kind of a sick bastard...'

Chapter-212: Knights and Knaves

"Uh… sure."

One day Kai would inevitably learn that Sunny was not as honest of a person as he considered him to be, but until then, having the naive archer believe in this ridiculous notion was rather... beneficial.

Turning away with a bit of awkwardness, Sunny glanced at Caster and called:

"Next!"

The proud Legacy was looking at Nightingale with a heavy expression. Hearing Sunny's voice, he lingered for a moment and then shook his head.

It seemed that Caster did not want to play his game.

Sunny was also suddenly painfully aware that between the six of them, four people had openly shared their Flaws with the rest, be it out of necessity or because of trust. Only two had not.

One of the two was Sunny, and the other one was Caster.

Sunny knew why he was hiding his Flaw from everyone, but what was the proud scion's reason? It sort of went against his whole honorable and dependable persona. With how devoted he acted toward Nephis and the cohort, it was strange to see him keeping secrets.

Was his reason the same as Sunny's, a dire vulnerability that the Flaw would uncover? Or was there some other reason? Maybe he didn't trust the members of the cohort as much as he tried to make them

think he did.

And if so… why?

With a shrug, Sunny left Caster alone. There was no point in lingering on these thoughts now. Until he had more information, any conclusion he could make would be useless, anyway.

Looking at Cassie, he smiled and said:

"Hey, Cas. Wanna give it a try?"

The blind girl hesitated for a bit, and then slowly approached him.

While she was walking over, Sunny couldn't help but think back to a conversation he had with her in the distant past. Back then, Cassie had told him that knowledge could be the heaviest thing in the world. The burden of her Flaw, while completely different from Kai's, was at the same time eerily similar.

They both longed for the bliss of ignorance, but were doomed to always bear the crushing weight of unwanted knowledge.

When Sunny thought about it, he found that all members of the cohort were connected with each other by invisible strings. Many things about them were like reflections, simultaneously the same, but also completely opposite.

Like the fact that he could tell no lie, while Kai could not be lied to. Or the fact that Nephis was like sunlight, while he was made of shadows. Cassie could not see, while he had basically two pairs of eyes. Changing Star dreamed of destroying the Nightmare Spell, but Effie dreamed of making it her paradise.

And so on.

Were these the strings of fate? Or was he just making empty connections because that was what humans were prone to do?

Come to think of it, only Caster didn't seem to be connected to any of them in any kind of a meaningful way. What was that all about?

Cassie sat down near Sunny, pulling him out of his thoughts.

He forced out a smile.

"Ah, right. Just like I said, the roles might have switched. So, what is your question?"

Cassie smiled and gestured to the shadow.

"My question is: if I were to ask Sunny which one of you has the treasure, what would he say?"

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, then gave the Ordinary Stone a mental command to speak one of the answers that he had whispered to it in advance.

In the same comically deep voice, the shadow seemed to speak:

"...The shadow has it."

Cassie nodded and turned to Sunny with subtle glee on her exquisite, doll-like face.

"Sunny, you have the treasure. Give."

With that, she expectantly outstretched her hand.

With a disappointed sigh, Sunny put the ascended soul shard in her palm and said in a listless voice:

"Congratulations. You've won. Great job, yay."

Cassie grasped the shard and giggled.

Meanwhile, Effie leaned forward with a bewildered look:

"What?! That's it?!"

She stared at the blind girl in astonishment, and then asked:

"How the hell did you do it?"

Cassie smiled and crushed the shard in her small fist, absorbing the

soul essence. Then, she shook her head and said:

"It's simple, really. No matter who you ask about the other person's answer, their answer will always be the opposite of the correct one. That's because the Awakened would have to tell the truth about the lie, while the devil would have to tell a lie about the truth. Do you understand?"

Effie thought for a moment, then shook her head.

"Nope. All the words you said seem to be familiar, but I don't understand crap. What do you even mean?"

Cassie laughed.

"Well, you should think about it in your free time. Or, you know… just beat Sunny up the next time he decides to tease you with such riddles."

With that, she went away, quite happy with herself.

Sunny watched her go with his mouth wide open.

'Did she really just say that?!'

Meanwhile, the perplexed huntress was staring at Sunny with a deep frown.

"Yeah… I might just do that the next time…"

He paled.

"What's up with that? This was an honest competition! Don't be a sore loser!"

Effie grinned menacingly.

"Sore? Let's see which one of use will be sore when I'm done with you."

'What… what kind of soreness does she mean, I wonder? Wait, no! Why would I wonder about that?!'

Standing up, Sunny glanced at Effie and scoffed.

"Who's going to be done with who? Don't flatter yourself, beanpole."

With that, he walked away with contempt clearly written all over his face.

His pace, however, was suspiciously hurried.

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A while later, the day was drawing to a close. Some of the Memories had already restored themselves, so almost everyone was wearing their clothes and armors.

Which, as far as Sunny was concerned, was a real shame.

...From a purely aesthetic point of view, of course!

However, something else attracted his full attention.

At the far end of the marble arch, Nephis and Caster were standing facing each other, with sharp swords in their hands.

They were about to clash...

Chapter-213: Sword Saints

Back when Nephis was teaching Sunny how to use the sword, he had never been good enough to be her sparring partner. Once he learned enough to be of any use in a training fight, their fragile alliance had already broken and shattered to pieces.

So, apart from that short altercation on the somber slopes of the Ashen Barrow, they had never actually crossed swords with each other.

Now, it seemed, Changing Star had found a reliable sparring partner. Caster had not only replaced Sunny as her right-hand man, but also filled the roles that Sunny had been either reluctant or unfit to take on.

'Well… good for them.'

Once the Memories of the cohort were close to being fully restored, Nephis and Caster moved to the far end of the white arch to practice. Now, they were standing opposite each other, ready to begin.

Although no one called him over, Sunny approached the two Legacies and sat down, ready to enjoy the spectacle. He was keenly interested in observing these two immensely skilled swordsmen in action.

Both of them had been trained for combat from the day they could walk. Watching them would surely be helpful to his understanding of battle styles and techniques. Not to mention that he was very interested to see the rematch between Nephis and Caster. The last time he saw them fight, Changing Star had lost, but not by much.

She also had held back her Aspect Ability at that time, but he doubted that that would change today. Neph's flame could be used both to heal and annihilate, but sadly, not to train.

Caster glanced at him and frowned with visible displeasure.

Was he irritated because Sunny was about to learn a thing or two about his technique, or because Sunny was ruining his alone time with Nephis?

'Either way, I don't care.'

"What are you doing?"

Sunny shrugged.

"Watching. Why? Does this part of the arch belong to your clan or something?"

The proud Legacy shook his head and turned away.

"Do as you wish."

Neph glanced at Sunny and didn't say anything. However, he could tell that she didn't mind.

In fact, it was almost as if she was approving of his decision.

Without wasting any more time, the two of them clashed in a whirlwind of steel, moving with the kind of speed that made it difficult for Sunny to follow along. The clangor of swords filled the air.

A bit stunned, he stared at the furious fight with a blank expression.

'...Damn.'

After the months of hunting monsters in the Dark City and his lessons with the Stone Saint, Sunny thought that he had developed his skill a lot. And he did. It's just that compared to Nephis and Caster, he was still so far behind that it was nothing short of disheartening.

Before, he had sometimes entertained the thought of maybe being able to stand against them… well, at least one of them… on equal ground. But now, this illusion was ruthlessly broken.

If things went south and he ended up on the opposite sides of the barricades with Caster, facing him would be tantamount to committing suicide. For now, at least.

Which, of course, simply meant that instead of facing him, Sunny would have to stab him in the back.

'Duly noted.'

He wasn't going to take on an enemy of this caliber in a forthright manner, anyway. What was he, a fool?

Concentrating on the fight, Sunny watched attentively. With the benefit of his new experience, he was able to discern more and learn more from how these two experts moved and acted. Sometimes, he was even able to predict what they were going to do next.

However, as time passed, a subtle frown appeared on his face.

'What is she doing? That doesn't make sense."

Sunny had been able to notice two unexpected things from how Nephis fought against Caster.

The first one was rather easy to spot. While Caster did not use the full extent of his incredible speed, he did use a fair share of it, making it almost impossible for Nephis to win any of their matches. She lost much more than she won, almost always by a few fractions of a second. Which was seemingly not conducive to training at all.

What was the point of training if one of the participants had almost no chance of winning because of how large the gap between them and their opponent was? There was a reason why Neph had never used Sunny as a sparring partner in the past, after all.

But then, with a bit of amusement, he realized that Changing Star was doing exactly what he had done with the Stone Saint. She was tempering herself against an overwhelming force. That's why she had instructed Caster to use just enough of his Aspect Ability to always be much faster than her.

Losing in a fight against a superior opponent was truly the best way

to learn.

'Ha! So I was right in my approach, after all.'

If Changing Star was doing the same, he had to be right.

The second thing he had noticed, however, was much more perplexing.

It was that Nephis was not using her usual flowing and unpredictable battle style. Instead, she was moving with precise and firm elegance, hiding behind a carefully woven wall of defense and patiently waiting for an opening to appear — instead of creating one herself.

While intricate and impressive, this style was still a bit lacking in comparison to her real one. What's more, while it was deliberate and dependable, it was also rigid.

If there was one thing that Nephis would never tolerate in her battle art, it was rigidity. Her whole worldview was built around the idea that nothing had more value than adaptability. That's why the style she had taught Sunny suited her so well.

It was designed to be the epitome of changeability.

So, the question was…

Why the hell she was using something so alien to her against Caster?

The answer was pretty obvious. Either Nephis was trying to experiment with something new in an effort to adopt elements of this style into her own… which didn't seem very likely...

Or she didn't want Caster to know her true combat style too well, for some reason.

But what could that reason be?

Sunny rubbed his chin.

'Interesting…'

Chapter-214: Transient Shadow

Did Nephis distrust Caster for some reason?

Sunny surely did, and to be entirely honest, he didn't even need any reason to do so. His intuition and general paranoia were enough.

But Changing Star was different. He had learned a bitter lesson and now knew that everything she ever did had a firm logic behind it. Even if that logic was entirely different from that of a normal person.

So if Nephis was hiding her true battle style from Caster, there was a reason for it.

But it didn't make any sense. From everything else that she had done, he was her most trusted lieutenant. Changing Star entrusted more to Caster than she ever had to anyone else. Caster himself also had never acted against Neph's interests.

In fact, he was even a bit too loyal. The bastard was always near Nephis, as though glued to her side. He also didn't seem to like it when others got too close to her.

In that regard, he was almost like that flying rapier of Cassie's. During their entire day on the marble arch, the unfriendly Echo somehow always managed to remain between the blind girl and any men who tried to approach her for whatever reason. The message it was sending was quite clear.

I'm watching you!

It was honestly rather comical.

Sunny shook his head. The dynamic of Changing Star's relationship with Caster was really weird. But once again, he didn't have enough information to make any conclusions. All he could do was keep his

eyes open and try to sleep with one of them open when the handsome Legacy was on watch duty.

Maybe it was some strange Legacy thing? Like guarding the secrets of the clan against the prying eyes of other clans.

Who knew?

Glancing at the fighting swordsmen, Sunny suddenly got an idea.

After considering it for a bit, he looked at them again. This time, his eyes were burning.

'That… that actually might work!'

The problem with his technique at the moment was that it lacked true individuality. Sunny knew that there was a secret hiding inside his shadow that could become the foundation of his own unique battle style.

He just couldn't understand what that secret was.

His progress at deciphering it had stalled. While training, Sunny had trouble keeping his eyes both on the Stone Saint and on the shadow. Whenever he tried, the taciturn knight would inevitably send him into a sea of pain. But even if he managed it somehow, there was an invisible wall standing between him and anything even remotely resembling understanding.

He was in a dire need of a breakthrough.

So what if… his shadows tried to imitate someone else instead of him? And not just someone, but a real sword expert in the middle of a fight?

Not only would Sunny be able to observe every tiny detail of its movements, but there would also be something to compare them against.

The shadow was a part of him, after all. It was hard to tell where Sunny ended and the shadow began. That's why the difference in how it moved and how he moved was almost imperceptible.

But if it followed someone else, he would be able to separate the cadence and pattern of that person's movements from the shadow's by contrasting it against his own.

This had to work!

Burning with anticipation, Sunny waited for Nephis and Caster to take a short break, and then send the shadow over to the handsome Legacy.

Leisurely strolling over the white marble, the shadow approached Caster and brazenly glued itself to his feet. Then, it crossed its arms and glared at the Legacy with almost palpable disdain.

Caster stared at the shadow for a couple of seconds and then raised his head to look at Sunny. There was a very strange expression on his face.

"What… what are you doing?"

His voice did not sound happy at all.

Sunny shrugged with a carefree smile.

"Oh, don't mind him. This cretin just lost me an ascended soul shard. As a form of punishment, I've decided to make him your shadow for a bit. So, you know. Just do your thing and don't worry about it."

The shadow turned its head and pierced him with a menacing look.

Sunny could practically hear its thoughts…

...Who are you calling a cretin, you cretin?

'That had to be it. Did I guess right, huh? Oh, sorry. I forgot you cannot answer.'

Not paying the offended shadow any more attention, he just smiled wider.

Caster frowned, hesitated for a few moments, and then said through gritted teeth:

"I would prefer if you wouldn't."

Sunny sighed.

"Ugh, alright. Whatever."

With that, he gave the shadow the command to leave the proud Legacy alone.

It separated itself from Caster, pretended to wipe its legs in disgust… and sauntered over to Nephis, only to get attached to her feet with visible delight. It even bowed gallantly to her own shadow and made sure to not get in its way.

'What… what is this moron doing?'

Of course, Sunny had ordered the shadow to approach Neph himself. But he didn't expect it to be so visibly pleased by it.

It was as if the shadow was simply beyond itself to finally follow someone competent.

'You traitor!'

Nephis looked down on the shadow, smiled, and didn't say anything.

'Well... good. Now, fight!'

The two Legacies did not make him wait long. A few moments later, they were once again locked in a furious battle. Only this time, two shadows were following Nephis.

Both of them loyally imitated her movements, however, one of them was slightly… almost imperceptibly… different.

Sunny looked at it with an intensity that threatened to burn two holes in the white marble.

Soon, his eyes widened.

'I… I see it! I think I see it!'

There, in the tiniest difference between the way Changing Star's own

shadow moved and the way his shadow moved, he finally saw it.

He had found his breakthrough.

Chapter-215: Shapeless

Observing the motions of two shadows that followed Nephis, Sunny was finally able to understand the foundation of the elusive shadow style.

Before, he only sensed a hint of its essence. He knew that just like the shadow, the hidden battle art was insidious, shapeless, and everchanging. But this was where lay the problem: a battle style was, by definition, a structured framework of patterns and principles, a doctrine that dictated how one should act to defeat an enemy.

That doctrine was used as a foundation and expanded into a variety of specific movements to create a style.

But If something didn't have a shape and its form was constantly changing, how could it ever be stable and structured? Sunny had no idea how the concepts he felt were at the core of the shadow style could create something even remotely applicable to practice.

Insidious, shapeless, everchanging. What was he supposed to do with that?

But now, he understood. The key to it all was so simple and evident that he almost laughed. Why had he not guessed earlier? It was so obvious.

The idea that tied everything together was as innate to the nature of shadows as formlessness and elusiveness.

It was imitation.

After all, what were the first two things that came to mind when one thought about shadows? That they lived in the dark and imitated the things that hid them from light.

The foundation of the shadow style was indeed insidious, shapeless, and everchanging. Its core concept was to steal that which made the enemy strong and use it to destroy them.

To master that style, he had to learn how to behave like a shadow.

Sunny stared at Nephis and Caster, but didn't see them. His mind was consumed completely by the sudden revelation. He had no time to pay attention to their fight anymore.

This style… this style had endless potential. If he managed to master it, he would be able to counter any style or technique used against him, not to mention become an immensely unpredictable opponent.

What could be more unpredictable than a formless shadow?

Of course, it was easier said than done. To begin with, while the ability to imitate the enemy was incredibly powerful, it also demanded an incredible amount of talent, experience, and insight from the user. You couldn't imitate that which you didn't understand, after all.

More importantly, this was just the foundation of the style. He still had to expand it into the actual collection of specific principles... and retrain himself accordingly.

That was a mammoth task.

Creating a complete style from scratch could take a true battle master years, if not decades. Sunny had not even scratched the surface of this ambitious undertaking.

However, this was alright. It was a start. Personal battle arts were not created in an instant, anyway. It was a long and arduous process, with endless iterations coming and going while being tempered by the crucible of combat.

It's not like the style would be useless until it became perfect.

Sunny just had to get it to the point where it could be applied in battle in one form or another. That alone would tremendously enhance his technique.

He smiled, congratulating himself. However, the next moment, a deep scowl appeared on his face.

'Uh… but how, exactly, am I supposed to do that?'

***

A while later, when the sun was already touching the western horizon, Sunny was sitting by himself and staring at his shadow. He was motionless like a statue and deep in thought. On his face, there was a troubled frown.

When someone approached him, Sunny lingered for a few moments and then slowly looked up to see who was disturbing him.

To his surprise, it was Nephis.

The leader of their cohort stood there for a bit, her graceful figure illuminated by the setting sun. Then, she sat down near him.

Sunny blinked.

"Uh… hey Neph."

Nephis gave him a nod.

"Hey, Sunny."

He waited for a few moments, and then asked:

"...Did you want something?"

The corner of her mouth slightly curled upward. With a sigh, Changing Star glanced at him and said:

"It's nothing much. I just wanted to say that I saw you fighting in the catacombs. You have improved a lot in these three months. Well done."

Sunny smiled.

"Ah, that. Well, it's not like there's a lot of opportunities to lead a peaceful life in the Dark City. I was bound to improve a little, no?"

She shook her head.

"Don't sell yourself short. You really did well. Very few would have been able to grow so much and as fast as you. Especially without a teacher."

After hesitating for a while, Sunny shrugged.

"You said it yourself. One real battle is worth more than a thousand hours of training. There were… a lot of battles. In those three months."

Nephis nodded, and then asked:

"That firm and grounded style you weaved into your technique… where did it come from?"

He scratched the back of his head and, remembering the hellish training sessions with his pet monster, held back the urge to shiver.

"I just observed how the Stone Saint fought and tried to replicate it."

Changing Star smiled:

"As I thought. I've seen her fight, too. It's a very formidable Echo. One of the finest I've ever seen."

Coming from a Legacy, this meant a lot. Sunny was indeed really lucky to be in the right place at the right time to get the Echo of the Stone Saint. If the Fallen siblings of the iron spiders had not brought her to the brink of death, he would never have been able to survive a battle with the living statue, let alone defeat her.

He was even luckier to have a Divine Aspect that allowed him to turn Echoes into creatures that were even more fearsome.

All in all, Sunny was extremely fortunate.

His fortune was exactly as incredible as his misfortune.

He grinned.

"You know my Attributes. I do get lucky a lot."

She lingered for a few moments, and then said:

"I'm glad that you were able to understand the true design of the battle style I taught you."

So he was right on this point, too. The style Changing Star had given him was indeed designed to be as adaptable as possible and seamlessly incorporate elements of other styles. It was a perfect foundational battle art… for those talented enough to make use of it, of course.

Which were, most likely, extremely few and far between.

Sunny glanced at Nephis and, after some deliberation, asked:

"That style of yours is truly unique. Where did it come from?"

He had been too inexperienced to realize this at the time, but what Neph had taught him could have been considered a rare treasure. The style he took for granted was, in fact, a work of pure genius. It deserved to be famous and ubiquitous.

But it was not. Which suggested that this treasure was a secret one.

Changing Star lingered for a bit, and then said:

"It's a part of my inheritance."

Sunny blinked and stared at her, stunned.

'Then... then why the hell did she teach it to me?!'

Chapter-216: Tacit Understanding

Sunny stared at Nephis with a complicated expression. After a while, he asked:

"Why did you entrust me with something so precious?"

She glanced at him, lingered for a few moments, then shrugged.

"We had a deal, remember? My knowledge in exchange for your share of the spoils we earn."

There had indeed existed such a deal. However, he had not exactly acted in good faith when proposing it. After all, he had no use for those spoils, in the first place.

Sunny scowled. If Changing Star had really revealed a family secret to him because of a lie, she had a valid reason to be resentful of him.

Just like he was of her.

With a dark smile, he looked away and said:

"You must have realized by now that I have cheated you in that deal."

Nephis turned to him and said, her voice calm and even:

"You mean the fact that you don't need to absorb soul shards to grow stronger?"

Sunny froze for a moment, then gave her a nod.

"You don't seem very surprised."

Figures. When Sunny first learned about this ability of his, he was

stunned. But Neph seemed to know a lot more than a normal person did.

She didn't even try to pretend otherwise.

"It's a very rare Aspect trait, but not unheard of among the upper echelons of the Awakened. In fact, I am capable of something like that myself. Although your case does seem to be especially unique."

Sunny glanced at her.

"How so?"

Changing Star remained silent for a few moments and then said, her voice hinted with a bit of wonder:

"Usually, when an Awakened absorbs the soul essence directly, the process leaves the remnants of the soul core empty. But when you do it, the shards are left brimming with it. This is very… unusual."

He shifted uncomfortably, and then said:

"Yeah, well… you have your share of secrets, too, Neph. Don't think that I didn't notice. Lineage Memories, Domains…"

Nephis interrupted him with a heavy gaze. When Sunny fell silent and looked at her with a frown, she said in a strangely somber tone:

"Never say those words aloud again, Sunny. I am serious. Just knowing them might get you killed."

He stared at her for a long time, and then scoffed.

"No problem. Since you showed me the courtesy of not prying into my secrets, I won't pry into yours. I don't really want to know, anyway. The mysterious "upper echelons" you mentioned can play their dirty little games all they want, as long as they leave me out of them."

Then, Sunny frowned and added:

"But there is one question I have to ask you, because it involves me

personally."

She raised an eyebrow.

"Sure. Ask away."

He grimaced.

"Why are you hiding the true core of your technique from Caster?"

Changing Star looked at him for a bit, and then smiled.

"So you've noticed. That's good, too. Yes… I've been using a different style when facing Caster."

Sunny looked at her with a humorless expression.

"Why?"

She shrugged.

"Why did you incorporate elements of the Stone Saint's technique into your own?"

He shook his head.

"To become stronger. Also, nice try at misdirection, but I won't fall for your tricks. I'm the one who taught them to you, remember? So just stop. Answer my question."

Nephis sighed and turned away, glancing at the silhouette of the Crimson Spire that loomed in the distance. After a while, she said:

"I'll answer you when we return to the Dark City. It won't change anything until then, anyway. Your safety won't be compromised in any way."

'What is that supposed to mean?'

As he glared at her, Changing Star stood up and turned to leave. Before that, however, she lingered for a moment and said:

"Keep sharpening your sword, Sunny. I expect big things from you."

With that, she walked away, leaving him speechless.

'And what does she mean by that?!'

***

After Nephis left, Sunny returned to staring at his shadow. However, despite the fact that he had figured out the essence and foundation of the elusive battle art that hid inside it, he had no idea how to go about creating an actual style out of them.

He did not have enough experience and mastery to be able to create something out of nothing. It was a dead end.

'Curses! Why even hide that damn mystery inside the Aspect if I can't do anything with it?!'

Perhaps in the distant future, he would be able to. But right now, it was as though he had found the door, but was not strong enough to turn the key and unlock it. It just stood there and teased him endlessly, just like the damn Gateway inside the Crimson Spire.

It was pure torture.

'Maybe I wasn't supposed to notice the existence of the hidden style so soon...'

But he did! And he worked so hard to gain insight into its secrets. Was it all for nothing? All the pain, all the effort?

Why would Spell do this to him?

'Do you have to ask? That's the damn Spell we're talking about! Why wouldn't it do something like this to you?'

With a bitter sigh, Sunny turned away and tried to forget all about the shadow, techniques, and battle styles. It was almost dark, anyway.

'Time to sleep.'

Walking over to the center of the marble arch, Sunny lay down

beside the other members of the cohort and tiredly closed his eyes.

The beach vacation was over. It was funny, visually stunning, and unexpectedly emotional... but ended on a bitter note.

Tomorrow was going to be another long day.

'To hell with this. This… this…'

Exhausted by all of it, he fell asleep before even finishing the thought.

***

'...this crap.'

Sunny opened his eyes and looked around in confusion.

The world was enveloped in a strange, dim twilight. Deep shadows surrounded him, shrouding the tall walls that were cut from black marble. Looking between the mighty columns, Sunny saw the black circle of the sun burning in the lightless sky.

'An… an eclipse?'

No, wait… what walls? What columns? Wasn't he supposed to be sleeping at the top of the white arch?

...What was happening?

Suddenly, a woman's scream tore the silence like a sharp knife. It was full of pain and suffering. Sunny tried to summon the Midnight Shard into his hand... only to realize that he had no hands.

Then, something else resounded from the darkness.

...A baby's cry.

'Wh—what the…'

Almost at the same time, Sunny realized something terrible.

This was a dream. He was dreaming.

…People were not supposed to dream in the Dream Realm!

'...Not good!'

Chapter-217: Origin

When Sunny realized that he was dreaming, the first thing that came to his mind was that there was another soul tree growing somewhere near the white arch. However, after a few moments of panic, he quickly dismissed this idea.

After all, he had never actually dreamt while under the mind hex of the ancient fiend. He had just mistaken the broken memories of his conversation with Cassie for a dream.

But this… this one was real.

The dreamscape that surrounded Sunny was ephemeral, shifting, and shrouded in shadows. Above him, the sun was like a circle of darkness, with crimson light drowning in a burning sea of clouds. However, none of that light reached him.

In the tenebrous hall of black marble, there was nothing but empty silence.

…Which was now destroyed by the sound of a baby crying, of course.

The woman's screams had long grown silent. Peering into the stygian depths of the dark marble hall, Sunny saw nothing but endless shadows. The baby's cries were coming from somewhere beyond them.

…Or from within them.

A subtle thought entered Sunny's mind. The monumental walls, the colossal columns, the grandiose hall… all of it looked strangely familiar. As though he had already been here once, a long time ago.

All that was missing were the signs of desolation and a large altar cut from a single block of black marble. In fact, it should have been

standing right where the crying sounds were coming from.

Familiar words appeared in his mind, now full of new meaning.

'...Child of Shadows?'

In the next moment, everything disappeared.

***

The world was swaying. A seemingly endless surface of black stone was flowing past his vision, moving up and down.

…No, it wasn't the stone, but Sunny himself. He was the one swaying.

'Wh—what?!'

In fact, Sunny found himself in the body… of a toddler. He was currently held gently by a young woman who was walking down a long stone corridor, which was dimly lit by burning torches. Hence, the swaying.

The girl was very young, not older than Sunny himself — his actual body, that is. She was slender and exquisitely beautiful, with soft porcelain skin and long raven hair. The lissome beauty was dressed in a flowing silk tunic that left her delicate neck and shoulders exposed.

A black serpent was coiled around her arms and neck, its scales so intricately tattooed that sometimes, it seemed as though the creature was moving. Whoever marked the girl's skin with this image was a true genius of their craft. Sunny had never seen anything like it in the real world.

However, he had seen similar markings in a Nightmare.

…This was the mark of a slave who belonged to the Shadow God.

The young girl was a temple slave, just like he had been in his First Nightmare. The serpent coiled around her neck and arms served both as her collar and her shackles.

She was also the toddler's mother. Sunny could tell from the love

with which she held the child and the quiet smile that appeared on her face every time she looked at him.

Sunny might have lost his own mother at a young age, but he still remembered that much, at least.

'If the mother is a slave, then the child is, too.'

Finally, Sunny began to understand what was happening to him.

The dream he found himself in did not belong to him. Instead, it belonged to the nameless temple slave whose role he had assumed during the First Nightmare.

The original child of shadows.

This vision was his memory.

***

Soon, the young girl entered a vast hall that was shrouded in darkness. Judging by the black marble walls, they were in another part of the ancient temple. Sunny couldn't see much of his surroundings, but he could somehow tell that they were underground.

In the center of the hall, seven tall braziers were burning with strange, pale flames. On the edges of light, motionless, stood a dozen or so people.

Sunny shivered, suddenly reminded of the silent shadows populating his Soul Sea. However, these were not ghosts, but humans. There were several other slaves, while the rest appeared to be priests.

To tell the truth, there was not a lot of difference between them. It seemed as though the servants of the Shadow God did not pursue opulence and status. In fact, many of the priests bore the same markings as the slaves, suggesting that they themselves had belonged to the temple once.

'What are they doing here? What is happening?'

Approaching one of the elder slaves, the young beauty entrusted the child to her. Separated from the warmth of his mother's chest, the toddler… Sunny… felt cold and scared. However, the older woman consoled him with gentle words, preventing the child from crying.

Then, she moved back to stand with the rest of the people gathered in the underground hall. Their faces were calm and solemn.

The young woman, meanwhile, slowly walked into the circle of light. Her movements were elegant, flowing, and graceful.

Stopping at the very center, she stood motionlessly between the seven pale flames, surrounded by seven shadows.

Sunny stared at the beautiful slave, feeling that something important was about to happen.

But… what?

As he became pensive and uneasy, a sudden sound broke the silence. It was the deep and reverberating ringing of a zither.

As the musical instrument sang, the slave girl suddenly moved.

As she did, her seven shadows moved with her.

'This… this is…'

With his eyes wide open, Sunny watched the young woman.

She was dancing.

The beautiful slave danced in the circle of light surrounded by impenetrable darkness, her every move full of indescribable grace and clear, but elusive purpose. Her young body was flexible and lithe, but also strong and trained as much as a warrior's. Her skill as a dancer was like that of a battle master.

It was mesmerizing.

The young woman weaved a beautiful pattern with her movements, their cadence and nature simultaneously firm and flowing, sharp and

gentle, clear and unpredictable. She danced alone but also with seven partners, effortlessly controlling both her own body and the seven shadows cast by it.

At times, it was hard to tell which one of them was real.

Her dance was… insidious, shapeless, and everchanging.

Sunny froze.

He recognized these movements. They were the same as how his shadow moved.

This was the source and origin of the battle style he wanted to create

This was Shadow Dance…

Chapter-218: Shadow Dance

Sunny opened his eyes.

The grand arch of white marble was exactly the same as when he had last seen it. The sun was already climbing the grey dome of the sky, chasing the remnants of the dark sea away. The rest of the cohort had woken up some time ago and were now preparing for the journey ahead.

He had overslept.

However, it didn't matter.

With eyes burning with excitement, Sunny sat up and recalled everything that he had witnessed in his dream.

The memories were still there, clear as day. He could recall every movement, every step, every breath of the dance that the beautiful slave had performed.

..The nameless slave's mother.

His eyes dimmed slightly.

That dream of his, while a precious gift, was also a source of numerous questions. Now that he was awake, Sunny was able to see a few things with more clarity.

The scene that he had witnessed at the very beginning of it was that of the nameless slave's… the original Child of Shadow's… birth. He was born during a solar eclipse, not unlike Sunny.

That fact put a lot of things into perspective. Everyone knew that the Spell did not choose the role an Aspirant would play during their First Nightmare randomly. That was apparent from the fact that the

bodies they inhabited in it, while different, were very close to their real ones.

However, the actual principle of how the Spell chose these roles and the events of the Nightmares were largely unclear.

But now, Sunny knew that he shared more than simply outer appearance with the temple slave whose body he inhabited for a few short days.

Both of them were born in similar, extremely rare circumstances. Both of them were at the very bottom of society, oppressed and unwanted, surviving against all odds instead of because of them.

Both of them were left without a family at a young age. The tough life in the outskirts took Sunny's parents and sister away. To the nameless slave, it was the servants of the mighty War God that destroyed his childhood home and life. Sunny didn't know what happened to the beautiful dancer after the last temple of Shadows was destroyed by them... but he doubted that it was anything good.

With a heavy sigh, he looked down.

…Fate. It was fate. What he shared with the temple slave was a similarity of fate.

Sunny was growing more and more convinced that the Spell was connected to the Strings of Fate in some way.

Perhaps it was weaved from them.

Remembering the void he had found himself in after completing his first trial, Sunny looked into the distance with wonder. That void was filled with a myriad of stars that served as nexuses for an inconceivably complex net made of countless strings of silver light.

Were those the strings of fate?

He shook his head.

Whatever they were, and whatever the Spell was, it was not something he could know or understand… yet. Numerous people,

most of them better informed and smarter than him, had tried and failed.

It was wiser to concentrate on something within his reach.

The Shadow Dance!

Sunny smiled.

He wasn't so engrossed by the dancing of the beautiful slave girl because it was truly stunning and enchanting. He was riveted beyond belief by it because he recognized the pattern of the battle style hiding in his shadow in her graceful movements.

Turns out, it wasn't a battle art at all. It was a dance.

But was there a difference?

Not in this case, not really.

It wasn't a coincidence that people often described the way true masters of battle fought as dancing. At their core, fighting and dance were very close. That's why combat, when brought to a truly impressive level, was like a dance.

So why couldn't a dance, when mastered to perfection, be like a battle art?

Sunny was certain that he was right. He had already comprehended the essence of Shadow Dance and gained insight into its foundation. With the memory of the beautiful dancer moving as one with her seven shadows, he now had the last piece of the puzzle — the actual set of moves and principles that he could use to create an actual battle style in their image.

He didn't have the battle art yet, but he did now possess all the components needed to create it.

Of course, it was not going to be easy. Even with all that knowledge stored in his mind, he would still have to spend a lot of time and effort and spill a lot of blood, both his own and that of his enemies, to turn the graceful dance of the beautiful slave girl into a deadly

dance of steel.

It wasn't even certain that he would succeed.

But Sunny would be damned if he wasn't going to try.

Shadow Dance would become his personal battle art. He was going to make it happen.

As if echoing his last thought, the familiar voice of the Spell suddenly whispered into his ear.

When Sunny heard what it said, his eyes widened.

[You have received an Aspect Legacy, Shadow Dance.]

***

Sunny stared into the emptiness, stunned to his core by what the Spell had just whispered.

Aspect Legacy… did it really just say those words?

He gulped.

Aspect Legacy was something that every Aspect contained, but very few Awakened ever received. Unlike the Boon of the First Nightmare, and every Nightmare after that, as well as the reward Sleepers received after returning from the Dream Realm for the first time, each Aspect Legacy had a unique set of requirements that the owner of the Aspect had to meet to unlock it.

When they did, they were rewarded with a powerful relic. Usually, it was a Memory that synergized perfectly with their Aspect Abilities, or sometimes even an Echo.

Legacy clans weren't called that accidentally. While not every clan possessed an Aspect Legacy, most of them did. In fact, it was the acquisition of the Aspect Legacy that laid the foundation for the creation of many of these clans.

By now, some of the most powerful clans even had several.

But getting an Aspect Legacy was not an easy feat. Most of them were received by Saints, followed by Master, and only a few were won by mere Awakened.

Getting the Aspect Legacy while still being a Sleeper… that was simply unheard of.

'Just like getting a True Name during the First Nightmare, I guess.'

Sunny couldn't believe his luck. Of course, he worked bitterly hard to be able to grasp it. And yet, the magnitude of the harvest he reaped was utterly unbelivable.

However… why was his Aspect Legacy not a Memory, but a battle art?

That was really strange.

Not wasting any time, Sunny summoned the runes and hungrily searched for new ones.

…What he saw made him tremble.

Chapter-219: Relics of the Past

Right there in the glimmering field of familiar runes, in the cluster describing his Aspect, a new string of them appeared.

Aspect: [Shadow Slave].

Aspect Rank: Divine.

Aspect Abilities: [Shadow Control].

Aspect Legacy: [Shadow Dance].

As soon as Sunny concentrated on the Aspect Legacy, new runes shined to describe it.

Shadow Dance Description: [Once an elegant dance, now a deadly battle art. This mysterious style was created by the treacherous Lost From Light after witnessing a graceful slave dancing with her shadows. Who else could have taken something so beautiful and turned it into something so vile?]

Sunny coughed, trying hard not to think too much about the manner in which the Spell had described him.

'Again with this treacherous stuff… I'm not that treacherous, okay? So what if I lie, manipulate, and backstab people all the time. That's just being smart…'

However, what grabbed his attention was not the description itself, but what glimmered beneath it.

Shadow Dance Mastery Level: [0/7].

First Relic: Unearned.

Second Relic: Unearned.

Third Relic…

There were a total of seven lines of runes, each promising him a Legacy Relic once he achieved the corresponding level of mastery with his newly envisioned battle style.

Seven of them!

Not one, not even two or three. But seven.

Whole Legacy Clans were created around a single Legacy Relic. Sunny couldn't even imagine what he would be able to do with seven.

Start a family and turn it into the most powerful clan in the world? No, that would mean putting all his eggs into one basket. Better create several clans!

Right! Why start a family when you can start seven?

Wait, no… that didn't sound right…

Right?

Consumed by avarice, Sunny looked at the rising sun with an excited grin. This was great! This was incredible!

However, his excitement was short-lived.

'Yeah, right. I would have to get back to the real world first. And that's not going to happen…'

Turning his head slightly, he stared at the distant silhouette of the Crimson Spire and lost himself in thought.

A while later, Effie's voice brought him back to reality.

"Hey, doofus! Breakfast is ready. Why are spacing out and smiling like an idiot?"

Sunny answered without thinking.

"Just thinking about creating a Legacy Clan. Have you ever thought

about creating a clan, huh, Effie?"

The robust huntress stared at him for a few seconds with a strange expression, and then grinned.

"...Is that an invitation?"

Still lost in thought, Sunny tilted his head and glanced at her astutely.

'Huh… not bad, not bad. The choice of a partner has to be of utmost importance when starting a Legacy Clan. Take Effie, for example. She is a very fearsome Awakened. Her Aspect is extravagant and powerful beyond belief. Plus, her physique is nothing short of divine.

Any heir she gives birth to is bound to be both strong and gorgeous… a very suitable candidate, I guess…'

"...Huh, what? No, not an invitation. Just considering different options."

At that moment, Sunny suddenly realized that he had been unceremoniously ogling Effie up and down for a better half of a minute, and that her grin had long turned dangerous at some point.

The huntress stretched her neck and said lazily:

"I see. So you have chosen death…"

He blinked.

"No! Wait! I didn't mean it like that! I was just, you know, theorizing!"

The unruly huntress cracked her knuckles and smiled menacingly.

"Oh, so you were "theorizing" about me, huh? Do tell, do tell…"

"No, no! Wait! Stop! Sto…"

***

Surprisingly, Sunny survived.

...Barely.

Soon after that, they left the grandiose marble arch and continued their journey into the depths of the Labyrinth.

Before the expedition started, Nephis had told him that they had a fast and comparatively safe way to reach the southern edges of the Forgotten Shore — as much as anything could be safe in this cursed place. Without it, getting to their destination would have taken them months.

Now that they had left the Dark City, Sunny finally decided to satisfy his curiosity and asked what that mysterious method of traveling with incredible speed was. When he heard the answer, he just stared blankly at Changing Star for a few minutes, trying to guess if she was kidding or not.

She wasn't.

In the end, he didn't even ask any questions and just waved his hand dejectedly. There was no point.

If Nephis had come to know of this secret from Cassie's visions and believed that it was doable, then he did not have to worry. Too much. It's not like he could turn back now, anyway.

Plus, the expedition had shown itself to be extremely lucrative for him so far. Mere days after its start, he had already gotten plenty of shadow fragments and an Ascended Memory, not to mention making a breakthrough in his exploration of battle styles and earning an Aspect Legacy for his effort.

In any case, they had to travel about a week's worth of time south to get the chance to access that fast method of travel. The heights they were going to use on the way as shelters during the nights there were planned in advance with the help of the Forgotten Shore map Nephis had created.

To make sure that these shelters were really where the map showed and remove any possibility of ending up stranded in the middle of the Labyrinth with no way to escape the dark sea, she had even

employed Kai during the week that Sunny had spent with Effie. The charming archer scouted the way ahead and confirmed that her map was correct.

Now, the only danger they really faced from the Forgotten Shore itself was that of a sudden storm. However, with a true oracle in the ranks of the cohort, this danger was dramatically diminished. Now that Cassie had grown into her powers and absorbed a lot of soul essence, she was often able to warn them in advance if something like that was going to happen.

…There were also the usual perils of the Labyrinth, of course.

And as they went deeper into its deadly maze, the situation slowly began to turn from bad to worse.

Chapter-220: So You're a Spider, So What?

As they ventured deeper into the southern reaches of the crimson Labyrinth, the situation slowly turned worse and worse.

The iron spiders that had been not too threatening to the cohort of powerful, experienced Dark City hunters at the start of it all were growing more and more deadly with each step of the way. Their numbers grew exponentially, becoming a real danger pretty soon. More and more often bigger and stronger monsters appeared at the head of the attacking beasts, bringing with them all sorts of problems.

What's worse, the spiderweb they used to trap their prey was changing, too. The metal wires from which it was weaved became so thin that it was at times almost impossible to notice it, and sharp enough to cut through armor and bone — while maintaining the resilience of superb steel.

The whole Labyrinth was covered in it, turning from crimson to dull grey.

The cohort bled much more because of the invisible webs than they did because of the spiders themselves. Of course, the iron spiders were cunning creatures, too. More often than not, they only attacked once one of the humans was caught in their nets, leading to a few really harrowing experiences for the members of Changing Star's party.

And there was a wide variety of other terrifying creatures waiting to ambush them in the twisting pathways of the crimson coral, too. What made them so dangerous was that the cohort didn't know anything about their anatomy and abilities. Every fight was a gamble, often resulting in one or several of them sustaining serious wounds.

There were three things that made the situation somewhat bearable.

The first one was Nephis and her healing flames. Although using the Aspect Ability took a toll on their leader, it was often worth it, especially if one of the members of the cohort received wounds that limited their mobility.

One thing was far more dangerous than any Nightmare Creature that lived in the Labyrinth, and it was not reaching safety before the torrent of black water flooded the Forgotten Shore, bringing inconceivable horrors with it. Thanks to Neph, they didn't have to worry about anyone slowing the cohort down.

The second reason, unexpectedly, was the iron spiders themselves. Because of the peculiar way they hunted, a lot of creatures found their deaths in the cutting embrace of the wire spiderwebs. Finding these eviscerated corpses or cocoons containing old carcasses became a common occurrence once the party invaded the depths of the spider territory.

Thanks to that, six humans were able to study and anticipate many of the monsters they had to face in this region of the Labyrinth. A lot of potentially deadly surprises had been avoided due to the cohort stumbling onto a corpse of a similar creature prior to fighting against a living one and spending some time to learn about its strengths and weaknesses.

The third reason was the Blood Arrow. In the hands of an experienced archer, it was almost as deadly as it would have been in the hands of an inexperienced one… the difference being that the latter would mostly be a danger to themselves, quickly turning into a bloodless husk.

The first time Kai had used it, Sunny experienced a disturbing feeling of shock. That time, they were facing a large group of iron spiders led by a much larger arachnid — the awakened monster of their tribe, similar in status to a carapace centurion.

These creatures were much heavier and more powerful, with thick plates of iron armor covering their bodies almost completely. Even Caster's enchanted sword had trouble cutting through their defenses.

What's worse, due to the speed with which the wretched abominations moved, it was especially hard to catch them in a gap between the armor plates.

Sunny was facing two smaller iron spiders at once while the Stone Saint was butchering the third one. With his shadow observing what was happening behind his back, he didn't miss the moment when the cunning awakened monster suddenly disengaged from Nephis and dashed into his direction, its mandibles moving in anticipation of tasting human flesh.

Calmly preparing to dodge, Sunny tensed his muscles… and narrowed his eyes.

Whistling over his shoulder, a menacing black arrow suddenly streaked through the air. Its shaft was made out of dark polished wood, with black feathers for fletching and a vicious white arrowhead that seemed to be cut from pale white bone, like a sharp fang of some terrible creature.

The arrow easily pierced the thick iron plate protecting the spider and tore deep into his body. Even though Kai messed up his shot a bit and hit the monster in its abdomen instead of the head, the results were nothing short of harrowing.

In the next moment, the awakened monster suddenly slowed down and staggered. Then, it tried to lunge forward once again, but ended up losing its balance and weakly falling to the ground. Its limbs moved slightly, quickly losing any form of cohesion.

Their movements grew slower and slower and then stopped. Beneath the iron plates, the spider's body grew taut and shriveled, like that of a mummy. Soon, it seemed completely… drained.

Sunny blinked, shaken by this disturbing image, and couldn't help but glance briefly at his forearm.

…If not for the Blood Weave, he might have ended up as a shriveled corpse, too.

He would have gone through with cutting off his arm and survived,

most likely. But if he had been a couple of seconds too late…

'Better not to think about.'

Anyway, he was glad that the Blood Arrow was on their side now.

Not too far away from him, gliding through the air, Kai suddenly made a strange gasping sound. Sunny didn't know what it felt like to have your blood magically drained and then suddenly returned to your body, but he doubted that it was pleasant.

Also, there was this question… if Kai's blood was used to create the arrow and then returned to him — if he had hit his mark, of course — then… where did the blood drained from the prey go?

He wasn't sure that he wanted to know.

In any case, with Nightingale in possession of the morbid Ascended Memory, their battles with iron spiders and other inhabitants of the Labyrinth became a bit less perilous. The Blood Arrow did not have any enchantments that needed to be activated by manipulating soul essence, so the charming archer could use it to its full potential.

Although Sunny was still a bit bitter about having to give such a menacing weapon away, he was now more confident than ever that his decision was the right one.

…Just like that, six more days passed by. During this time, he didn't gain any new Memories, but managed to accumulate eighteen more shadow fragments, bringing his total to three hundred and forty. He was still not as strong physically as he had been before creating the Shadow Saint, but getting closer and closer.

In the evening of the sixth day, bloodied and exhausted, the cohort had finally approached the goal of the first leg of their expedition.

Looking at it, Sunny couldn't help but stop in his tracks.

His eyes slightly widened.

'Of course…'

Chapter-221: Zenith

In front of them, the ground was shattered, creating a titanic fracture. The canyon was so deep and vast that Sunny had to strain his eyes to see the other side of it. Crimson coral clung to its walls, spilling over the edge like a torrent of blood.

A long time ago, a graceful bridge of white stone connected the two sides of the canyon together. Now, however, it was broken, with only its base remaining in place.

Looking at the bridge, Sunny realized that there must have been an ancient road somewhere beneath their feet. It led directly to the main gates of the ancient city, moving across the colossal canyon by means of the miraculous bridge and passing beneath the grandiose arch of white marble.

Come to think of it, the headless knight, the Ashen Barrow, and the graceful woman whose hands had saved him twice were also situated in a straight line. Perhaps there was another road leading east, too.

However, this thought disappeared from his head as quickly as it had appeared. All his attention was drawn to the remnants of the stone bridge, where...

Stood another giant statue.

Right above the weathered ruins stood a colossal stone warrior. He was clad in an archaic cuirass, with a beautiful spear resting on his shoulder. The warrior was facing south, as though greeting the travelers who traveled on the road to reach the ancient city.

…Of course, his head was missing.

More than that, the whole statue was covered in vast sheets of dull grey spiderweb, as if dressed in a solemn burial shroud. Sunny

shivered, afraid to imagine what kind of creature was capable of creating the thick metal cables of the web that encompassed the stone colossus.

Noticing his expression, Effie smiled.

"Scary, huh?"

Sunny gave her a nod, hoping against all hope that they would not have to find out the answer to his question.

For once, his hopes were not shattered to pieces.

The vivacious huntress sighed.

"I haven't seen it myself, but I heard stories of the creature that used to make its nest here. It was the mother of all these damnable spiders we've been dealing with for the past week. A huge menace of a Nightmare Creature, as big as a house and utterly deadly. Armored like a hover tank, too."

Sunny gulped and cast a sideways look at Nephis.

"What's a hover tank?"

Effie blinked a couple of times, then answered in an amused tone:

"Oh, right! You're a school dropout, I almost forgot. You've seen a PTV before, right? PTV stands for a "personal transport vehicle", as you know. I hope. Well, a tank is sort of like that, only much bigger and heavier, with thick armor and a kinetic or energy cannon installed on it.

The government sometimes employs them to support Awakened when a Gate opens near populated areas."

Sunny tried to imagine such a vehicle and hazily remembered seeing something like this on the news when he was a kid. Mostly, these tanks Effie had described were shown opened like tin cans, with their crews pulled out and eaten by attacking monsters.

He shivered. Mundane people had no business fighting against

Nightmare Creatures.

To be completely honest, even Awakened had no business facing them. It's just that they had no other choice.

"...We're not going to try and kill that big spider, are we?"

Effie laughed.

"Actually, it's your lucky day. We won't be meeting the Spider Mommy. In fact, no one ever will. She's long dead."

Sunny sighed with relief and glanced at the huntress:

"Yeah, great. But how do you know?"

She shrugged.

"She was killed by the second ruler of the Bright Castle — before he went and got himself killed trying to conquer the Crimson Spire. The huntress who showed me the ropes when I arrived on the Forgotten Shore had actually been one of the members of his cohort once, if you can believe it. In fact, she was the one who dealt the finishing blow to that abomination."

Effie looked at the giant mass of spiderwebs and shook her head.

"It must have been one hell of a battle, huh? Anyway, I'm glad that she did. That's how she received the Zenith Shard, which I then inherited."

Sunny frowned.

"What exactly are you talking about?"

The huntress leaned on her beautiful bronze spear and patted its shaft.

"My spear. It's a tier-five Awakened Memory, so the big bad spider was an awakened tyrant, I guess. Can you imagine? All these creepy crawlers serving a sentient commander. Thank gods it's dead."

Sunny looked at her with a dubious expression.

"Why would that mentor of yours give away such a treasure?"

Effie was silent for a few moments, then smiled.

"Ah, we were kind of close. Plus, she had no idea how to use a spear. Sorcerers, am I right? In any case, she gave the Zenith Shard to me."

Despite her carefree tone, he could tell that that smile was fake. Effie did not let it show, but Sunny could tell that the death of this huntress whose name he didn't even know affected her more than she was telling.

Who knows. Since Effie's original cohort had perished in the catacombs, their corpses might still be somewhere there, in those cursed tunnels.

However, something else was on his mind.

Sunny furrowed his brow. Midnight Shard, Zenith Shard. Was there a connection? He didn't know.

There might have been. He had received the Midnight Shard from Nephis, who had gotten it after killing the Carapace Demon.

The Demon, even though it had been enthralled by the Soul Devourer, appeared as the leader of the Nightmare Creature in that region of the Labyrinth… just like the brood mother of the iron spiders had been.

Two headless statues, two powerful abominations, two Memories with similar names. Wasn't it a little bit too much to be a coincidence?

Glancing at Effie, he asked:

"Was your spear forged from a shard of a fallen star, by chance?"

Just as he said it, Cassie slightly turned her head, listening to their conversation. That small detail told Sunny everything he wanted to know.

The huntress raised her eyebrows.

"It was, at least according to its description. Who told you?"

A corner of Sunny's lips slightly curled upward.

"No one. I just guessed."

With that, he left Effie alone and walked forward.

It seemed as though he was right. There was some hidden meaning behind the names of these two Memories. Cassie seemed to know something about it, and that meant that Nephis did, too.

And yet, they chose to keep it from Sunny and the rest of the cohort.

He sighed.

'So this expedition is not as simple as it seems.'

Not that it ever seemed particularly simple, to begin with.

He had guessed a long time ago that Changing Star had some hidden motive to want to leave the Dark City, but now, his suspicions were as good as confirmed.

The smile disappeared from Sunny's face.

He didn't like being kept in the dark at all.

'Kept in the dark, huh. Oh, the irony…'

At that moment, his shadow reached the base of the giant statue. With a deep frown, Sunny summoned the Midnight Shard and glanced at Nephis, putting all needless thought aside.

"There's a nest ahead. We will have to destroy it to access the statue. Lots of spiders... some bigger ones, too."

She gave him a nod and turned to face the others.

"We need to clear the nest and climb the statue before the sun sets. Prepare for battle..."

Chapter-222: Clearing the Nest

A clear and melodic sound of a ringing bell reverberated through the air above the Labyrinth, alerting the monstrous spiders hiding in the enormous cocoon of grey webs that a new prey came knocking on their door.

Moments later, swift bodies clad in heavy plates of iron armor shot from beneath the grey spiderweb, moving through the steel wires with terrifying speed. There were enough Nightmare Creatures in that wave to obliterate anything that stood in their way… seemingly.

However, what stood in their way were two figures — one tall and boisterous, the other one on the shorter side and radiating a strange feeling of indifferent firmness.

They were Effie and the Stone Saint. Both held their shields raised, the tips of their weapons resting on their edges. As the huntress grinned, the Shadow silently struck the rim of her shield with the blade of her sword twice.

As if answering that call, a vicious black arrow suddenly appeared from somewhere above, hitting the leading spider right in one of its many eyes. The monster's legs buckled, and it fell to the ground, forcing those creatures that followed behind to either dash around or jump over the massive body.

A fraction of a second later, the wave of spiders crashed into the small shield wall. A deafening roar of iron striking against iron resounded under the grey skies of the Forgotten Shore like a thunderclap. Despite the furious force of the assault, Effie and the Stone Saint somehow held — at least for now.

As soon as the momentum of the iron spiders was slowed down a little, Nephis and Caster appeared out of nowhere and attacked the mass of repulsive creatures from the sides. At the same time, a

stonelike sword and a beautiful bronze spear lashed out from behind the shields.

Black blood splashed into the air.

Meanwhile, Sunny softly landed on the ground behind the Nightmare Creatures and stealthily moved through the shadows, swiftly approaching them from the back. The Midnight Shard flashed, sending one of the spiders into the embrace of death.

[You have slain an awakened beast…]

Without listening to the Spell, Sunny used the precious moments before the enemy noticed his presence to wreak as much havoc as possible. His tachi moved twice more, severing several limbs and heavily wounding another abomination. After that, the spiders finally reacted to his treacherous attack…

'Not treacherous... just... smart!'

With Effie and the Stone Saint holding the front, Nephis and Caster attacking from the sides, and Sunny closing the trap from behind, the monstrous arachnids were now surrounded from all sides.

…Well, sort of.

Of course, a small group of dormant humans could never hope to truly surround this many superior Nightmare Creatures, not even with the help of a monster of their own. Trapped or not, as soon as the iron spiders had the time to react, they could easily overwhelm and tear them to pieces.

Especially Sunny, who was behind the line of these vicious creatures and all alone. If the spiders decided to shift the focus of their attack, he would be dead in seconds.

As another black arrow hit one of the larger spiders in the abdomen, Sunny hissed and dove under a spider scythe, then thrust his sword forward, ruthlessly piercing the head of the beast through its open, salivating mouth.

[You have…]

With no time to tear the Midnight Shard from the spider's corpse, Sunny let go of its hilt and jumped back, narrowly avoiding being crushed by another ironclad creature.

The few seconds of the advantage they had were coming to an end. A moment or two later, the spiders were bound to come to their senses. Even though the cohort had managed to kill ten or so in this short window of time, there were still enough of the deadly creatures to rip them to shreds.

Sunny didn't even have to look at Nephis to feel the shift in her movements. The silent understanding the two of them developed during their journey through the Labyrinth many months ago was still there, allowing them to cooperate perfectly without the need to use any words, as though they were two parts of the same whole.

In fact, despite the rift in their relationship, this bond was stronger than ever.

Perhaps because they understood each other so much better now... for better or for worse.

Ah, it was so exhilarating to fight side by side with Changing Star once again…

Just before the spiders were able to turn the tide of the battle in their favor, Effie and the Stone Saint — who was following Sunny's command — suddenly moved to the sides.

Nephis, Caster, and Sunny braced themselves.

Behind the improvised shield wall stood Cassie. She was holding a wooden staff in her hands, while an elegant rapier hovered in the air above her shoulder.

The tip of the rapier pointed directly at the spiders. As though following the direction of the Quiet Dancer's blade, Cassie moved her staff and activated its enchantment.

Immediately, a powerful gust of hurricane wind slammed into the mass of the Nightmare Creatures, sending several of them reeling and throwing clouds of dust into the air. Of course, it wasn't strong

enough to truly throw these abominations off their balance or damage them in any way.

However, that wasn't the plan.

Spider kin of these creatures back on Earth had a uniquely powerful sense of hearing. Which was rather strange, considering that they had no organs that resembled ears at all. The truth of the matter was that spiders were able to feel the vibrations of sound waves.

They were also masterful architects, using the vibrations in the specially created threads weaved into their webs to sense the movements of their prey from afar.

These Nightmare Creatures were much the same. As the powerful wind threw dust into the air and made every wire of every surrounding spiderweb vibrate all at once, they were momentarily disoriented.

The members of the cohort were waiting for this exact moment. Instantly, they attacked with ferocious determination, spilling rivers of viscous black blood onto the ground. Sunny himself had already gotten his austere sword back, and now used its razor-sharp blade to gut the beast that had forced him to retreat a couple of seconds ago.

[You have slain…]

By the time the iron spiders came back to their senses, their numbers were significantly diminished.

…But there were still so many of them.

After that, the battlefield became consumed with chaos. There was no time for plans or tactics anymore. Every member of the cohort had to face off against multiple opponents, fighting with desperate resolve against enemies that surpassed them both in terms of personal power and numbers.

Only the Stone Saint was calm and indifferent, moving through the ranks of the iron spiders like a graceful incarnation of pure darkness.

The battle fell apart into several small pockets of fearsome violence.

Kai was trying to support his companions from above, but with how intense the fighting got, he was having trouble finding the opportunities to take shots without risking hitting them.

He was too afraid to take a risk, knowing all too well how harrowing the effects of the Blood Arrow were. If even the Nightmare Creatures of higher rank were doomed to succumb to a torturous death after being wounded by the ghastly Memory, humans like them had no chance of surviving.

For now, people on the ground were on their own.

...Sunny was struggling against two ironclad abominations, gritting his teeth in exasperation. The damn bastards were too fast to reliably hit them in the gaps in armor and too damn powerful to face them directly. As the result, he was forced to constantly dance between the two of them, dodging the whirlwind of strikes that rained on him from all sides.

"Curses!"

Jumping back, he held the Midnight Shard with one hand and used another to throw the Prowling Thorn in the direction of one of the spiders. The creature easily dodged the kunai and continued its attack, threatening to slice Sunny's hand clean off.

He had no choice but to retreat once again.

…Behind the menacing beast, the throwing dagger continued to spin. A few moments later, it cut a smooth arch in the air and flew back, as if turning into a boomerang.

Sadly, just like the spiders back on Earth, these repulsive creatures had an almost absolute field of vision. The second spider simply moved its head down at the last moment without even bothering to turn it, dodging the heavy kunai that approached it from behind.

But Sunny was never trying to wound the Nightmare Creatures with the Prowling Thorn, to begin with. Instead, he wanted to let them taste their own medicine.

A moment later, the invisible string of his kunai drew taut, wrapped

around two massive bodies. Just like prey used to be caught in their webs, the iron spiders were now caught by the invisible string of the Prowling Thorn, tripping over it and crashing into each other.

Sunny dashed forward and let the Midnight Shard sing. The graceful blade flashed twice, sending two ugly spider heads spinning into the air.

[You have slain an awakened beast, Iron Spider.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

Kicking one of the heads away, Sunny swiftly glanced around, searching for a new enemy.

But there were none.

[...You have slain an awakened beast, Iron Spider.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

[You have received a Memory.]

The gargantuan cocoon of steel spiderwebs was empty. Corpses of its previous inhabitants littered the ground, oozing with black blood.

The cohort had cleared the entire nest full of Awakened abominations.

No matter how incredible, this was the undeniable truth.

They had won.

Chapter-223: Natural Selection

The danger was gone, so Sunny allowed himself to tiredly kneel on the ground, his breathing heavy and laborious. The strenuous battle against the host of spiders had not lasted long, but he was utterly exhausted. The intensity of these perilous minutes was enough to bring anyone down to their knees.

'Too weak. I am still too weak.'

With a heavy sigh, he summoned the runes and glanced at the number of shadow fragments.

Shadow Fragments: [362/1000].

Not bad. Clearing the nest had given him twenty-two fragments — ten for the five iron spiders he had killed himself, and another twelve for those slain by the Shadow Saint.

With the taciturn monster serving as his murderous pet, the speed with which Sunny was able to accumulate power was twice as fast, at least. If things continued like this, the Stone Saint was going to return his investment of a hundred shadow fragments in no time.

'If I live long enough.'

With a grimace, Sunny dismissed the Midnight Shard and slowly got up. The sun was already rolling down toward the horizon, so they had to hurry with collecting soul shards from the corpses of the iron spiders.

There were a lot of corpses…

Cutting one of the beasts open with the Prowling Thorn, Sunny struggled with the idea that they had eviscerated this many Nightmare Creatures. Of course, he had expected this much. After all,

Nephis and Sunny had been able to fight against two or three carapace scavengers back when it was only the two of them.

Both of them were much weaker, less experienced, and barely equipped with Memories back then, too.

Now that they had spent seven whole months in the Dream Realm — many times more than most Sleepers ever had to — and tempered themselves against the perilous hellscape of the Forgotten Shore, both their skill and level of power had dramatically increased.

Add the fact that there were two other powerhouses fighting alongside them, as well as Nightingale and the menacing Stone Saint, and the outcome of the battle ceased to be that surprising.

And yet, observing the carnage that they had left in their wake still made Sunny doubt his eyes.

These were Awakened Nightmare Creatures, still.

The real reason why the cohort had won did not lie in the individual prowess of its members, but in their ability to cooperate and control the battlefield. The iron spiders were powerful and deadly, but at the end of the day, they were still mindless beasts. That's why they had allowed themselves to be surrounded and trapped.

Had they been commanded by a creature of a higher Class, one that was as cunning and smart as the humans it faced, things would have turned out very differently.

Sunny sighed.

Come to think of it, the Labyrinth was a curious place. It teemed with abominable creatures of all kinds, but almost all of them were of the mindless variety. The only two exceptions he knew about were the Carapace Demon and the Spider Matriarch, who had been either a devil or a tyrant.

Perhaps it was just the nature of this place. Nothing too big and strong could escape from the flood of black water that drowned the world every night. Only comparatively small monsters were able to run away or hide — both from the dark sea itself and from the

hungry terrors that inhabited it.

These monsters were an almost insurmountable threat to those unfortunate young people who were sent to this forsaken hell by the Spell, but by the standards of the Forgotten Shore itself, they were nothing but insects.

A horde of parasites who fed on the crumbs left behind by the true masters of this place.

'What a depressing thought.'

This notion poured cold water on Sunny's pride over their achievement.

'Well. Whatever…'

Soon, they were done with the gruesome job of fishing out the soul shards out of the dead spiders. While Nephis was dividing the spoils among the members of the cohort, Sunny used the chance to dive into his Soul Sea and inspect the Memory he had received during the battle.

It turned out to be a cloak weaved from spider silk. Judging from the description, the cloak could provide him with a small amount of protection against physical attacks, simply by virtue of being very hard to pierce.

Without thinking too much, Sunny fed the cloak to the Stone Saint. It was just a tier-one Memory, so no amount of protection it could provide would be of any help in this damned place. He would also rather kill himself than go into a battle while wearing a cloak. There were easier and less painful ways to die.

Plus, it was white. Didn't exactly go along with the dark grey fabric of the Puppeteer's Shard, not to mention being a hindrance to anything having to do with stealth.

The Stone Saint absorbed another shadow fragment, at least.

Receiving his share of the soul shards and entrusting them to Effie, who had more than enough space in her enchanted bag, Sunny

glanced at Nephis.

Changing Star was looking at the sun, calculating something in her head. After a few moments, she sighed and said:

"We still have some time. Let's explore the nest before ascending the statue."

Sunny grinned.

As an amateur explorer, this was exactly what he wanted to hear.

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The nest was formed by endless wires of the strange metal web and resembled a vast sphere. It was built around one of the legs of the stone colossus, effectively blocking the path to the bridge.

The entrance was situated high above the ground, and extremely wide. Looking at the diameter of that hole gave Sunny an understanding of just how big the Spider Matriarch had been.

He shivered. The second lord of the Castle had been a very powerful individual. Sunny didn't even want to imagine what the battle with the giant arachnid must have looked like.

Inside, it was dark and damp. Drops of black water were falling from above, creating an ominous melody.

Peering into the darkness, Sunny suddenly stumbled and froze for a moment.

This… he didn't expect.

Chapter-224: Pyre

Inside the giant nest of spiderwebs, a desiccated corpse of the colossal Matriarch lay shriveled on the floor, its iron carapace shattered by some devastating blow. The creature was long dead, but the sight of it was still terrifying.

The vast abdomen of the brood mother, however, appeared to have been severed much later than her fatal battle against the Lord of the Bright Castle. It almost looked as if it was… torn apart from within. Inside the terrifying wound, Sunny noticed the shattered remnants of five giant, metallic eggs.

The size of them was about the same as that of the five monstrous Fallen Beasts that had destroyed the original Stone Saint and her brethren back in the Dark City.

'So… that was where they came from.'

Looking away with a shiver, Sunny noticed numerous cocoons of spiderwebs attached to the walls of the nest all around the dead Matriarch. Inside them, withered carcasses of Nightmare Creatures of all shapes and sizes were preserved in a strangely good condition.

This was a true museum of terror.

The Nightmare Creatures appeared as though they were kept alive inside the cocoons for a long, long time before finally succumbing to death and turning into mummified corpses. Perhaps the abominable spiders stored them there for later consumption.

Or… not.

Noticing a few cocoons that had been broken open and what was inside of them, Sunny had to try hard to stop himself from vomiting.

The iron spiders did not use the monsters caught in the cocoons for food.

...They used them as incubators.

The creatures in the broken cocoons had been devoured from within. A few of them still had hundreds of small, moist eggs embedded into their flesh, with embryonic spiderlings moving weakly behind the slightly transparent shells.

'Curse… it all…'

Damn these spiders, damn the Labyrinth, damn the Forgotten Shore… and especially damn the damned Nightmare Spell that had brought him here. Sunny suddenly felt tired of this long, feverish, neverending nightmare he had found himself in.

But the worst was still to come.

He was the first to notice it. With a dark grimace suddenly appearing on his face, Sunny called out to his companions. Then, he led them deeper into the nest, where, attached to the wall, hung a cocoon that was different from all the others.

Because this one hid a rough silhouette of a human body.

The six of them stood somberly around the cocoon, each consumed by their own dark thoughts. Finally, Nephis turned her head to Caster and said:

"Can your sword cut it open?"

With a short nod, the proud Legacy summoned the enchanted jian and took a step forward. Approaching the cocoon, he stopped and hesitated for a few moments.

"Be careful."

Glancing back at Changing Star, Caster lingered for a second, and then faced the cocoon with grim determination written on his face. As ghostly green light emanated from the blade of his sword, he swung it with the graceful precision of an expert swordsman.

The tip of the jian cut through the metal wires of the cocoon, splitting it open. A shriveled human body fell to the floor, making the Legacy jump back.

Nephis, Caster, and Sunny stared at it, their faces pale and full of ghastly resentment. Then, Sunny bent over and emptied the contents of his stomach.

…This was just too much.

The young man whose corpse they found in this harrowing place did not die an easy death. In fact, being eaten alive from the inside by hundreds of tiny Nightmare Creatures was probably the worst fate imaginable. At least Sunny couldn't think of anything worse.

But even worse still, he recognized the dead Sleeper.

His face was strangely intact, with an expression of horrifying agony frozen on it forever. Despite the overall condition of the corpse, Sunny knew who it was just from one look.

It was the young man who had attended the Academy with them, the one who had called him a shorty when Sunny first approached Caster to create the impression that he was a boastful lunatic.

Looking at their condition, Effie frowned:

"Did you guys know him?"

After a few moments of silence, Caster slowly nodded.

"Yes. His name is… his name was Stephen. He was the youngest heir of the Pandavar clan.

'Stephen…'

Sunny had not even bothered to learn the name of this arrogant young man back when they were preparing to venture into the Dream Realm at the Academy. In fact, he had really disliked him, and for good reason.

But looking at the hideous, terrifying corpse in front of him, he had

forgotten all about it. Sunny would never wish this fate on anyone, let alone one of his fellow students.

Slowly, a solemn mood took over the cohort. They had already known that the other three Sleepers sent to the Forgotten Shore this year never made it to the Dark City, which meant that they had perished somewhere in the Labyrinth. However, finding one of them served as a stark reminder of how fragile their own lives were.

Who knew what would happen to them in the future? If not today, death could be waiting for them tomorrow. Perhaps years from now, it would be their corpses that someone would stumble upon by accident.

Some time later, Nephis gritted her teeth and turned away. Then, she said, her voice suppressed and hollow:

"We need to leave. The sun is setting."

Her words broke the silence and brought everyone back from their grim reveries. Caster lingered for a few minutes, then spoke in a hesitant tone:

"Aren't we… aren't we going to bury him?"

Changing Star shook her head.

"There's not enough time. I also don't want anyone touching the bodies infected with these eggs. It's too dangerous."

The members of the cohort looked at each other. No one had a reasonable objection, but it felt wrong to just leave their fellow human here.

Finally, Nephis sighed. A complicated expression appeared on her face, and then she said:

"...Alright. Go. I'll catch up with you guys later."

Sunny stared at her for a few moments, and then slowly turned away. One after another, the five of them glanced at Changing Star and left, leaving her alone with the dead young man and numerous cocoons,

each hiding a slain Nightmare Creature.

As soon as the last member of the cohort climbed out of the nest, a beam of pure radiance suddenly shot from the dark hole of its entrance, followed by a wave of scorching heat.

The purifying fire unleashed by Changing Star engulfed the remains of their fellow student and then spread to the numerous cocoons, the Nightmare Creatures inside of them, and even the corpse of the Spider Matriarch herself.

The insides of the nest turned into an incandescent, incinerating furnace. Everything inside of it was doomed to be annihilated and turn to ashes.

A few minutes later, the whole structure was consumed by furious white flames.

Nephis had escaped the burning nest shortly after the rest of her cohort, her face pale and tired.

Leaving the grandiose funeral pyre behind, they began ascending the statue of the ancient warrior.

The night was approaching.

Chapter-225: On the Shoulders of Giants

Once they climbed all the way to the broad shoulders of the statue and found a suitable place to make camp, everyone looked down without having to say anything.

Far below them, the giant nest was still aflame. The cables that constituted it were melting and turning into rivers of liquid metal, flowing down from the edges into the vast abyss of the canyon.

The turbulent black waters were rising from below to meet them. When the two streams met — one lightless, the other incandescent — billowing columns of hot vapor shot into the air. For a few moments, it seemed as though light and darkness were on equal footing.

But then the cursed sea rose from the depths of the canyon in a surge and washed the brightness of melting iron away. The flood of blackness crashed into the burning nest, dousing it.

A minute or so later, the white flames were gone. The surface of the dark sea continued to rise, as though nothing had ever happened.

Sunny sighed and turned to Nephis.

Now that they had reached their goal, it was time to face the real danger. With a grim expression on his face, he asked:

"So… now what?"

He knew the general concept of how she was planning to reach the southern edges of the Forgotten Shore in a short time, but not the details.

Changing Star glanced at him, lingered for a moment, and then said:

"We arrived at the canyon faster than I expected. There are still two days left before we can act. So, make yourself at home. We'll rest tomorrow and start preparing for it the next day."

Sunny smiled.

Rest… that sounded swell.

Plus, he wasn't really looking forward to making use of the "fast and comparatively safe" method of traveling through the Labyrinth that Nephis had talked about.

In fact, he would rather never have to use it at all.

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Just like that, the cohort found itself with nothing to do for the next two days. Before leaving the Dark City, Changing Star had anticipated that various things could slow them down and padded the schedule of the expedition with extra time.

Who knew that they would actually make it to the broken bridge so fast?

In any case, Sunny wasn't complaining. He had a lot to do and think about.

For example, the mysterious connection between his tachi, Effie's spear, and the headless statues that stood around the Forgotten Shore.

The statues represented the seven valiant heroes that had made an oath to return light to this cursed land thousands of years ago. Sunny had seen three of them by now: the knight, the graceful woman, and now this mighty warrior.

Did every statue have a connection with a specific Memory? If so, what was that connection and why was Nephis so reluctant to share this information with everyone?

Well… it wasn't like he and Changing Star were very close now. Sunny had drawn a clear line to denote the nature of their

relationship himself. He insisted that he was not a true member of the cohort, but merely a hired specialist.

Why would she share her secret with him?

This was a logical conclusion, but Sunny couldn't help but feel a bit resentful.

Despite the fact that he was her first partner, now, the situation had changed. Nephis had other people to rely on… like Caster.

So why would she say that Sunny was the only person she trusted on the Forgotten Shore except for Cassie, and then hide her technique from Caster?

Everything felt so complicated.

In any case, there was an invisible line drawn between the core members of the hunting party and the outsiders — Sunny and Kai.

No one consciously avoided them, but it was clear that the line existed. When all was said and done, the four true members of the cohort preferred each other's company. That's why Sunny and Kai ended up spending a lot of time together, chatting about this and that and generally having a nice time.

Honestly, Sunny couldn't complain. As far as companions went, the charming archer was not the worst option.

Plus, their conversations were extremely entertaining.

Kai had a lot of fun stories about his life as a celebrity, while Sunny had plenty of macabre anecdotes about his life in the outskirts.

Their life experiences were so vastly different that it was almost as if they were from different worlds. As a result, both felt like they were listening to fictional stories about some strange and fantastical land that they had never heard about before.

Sunny spent the rest of his time training with the sword, trying to turn Shadow Dance from an ethereal concept into a practical set of core principles. The progress was painfully slow, but now there was

progress, at least.

He was having so much trouble because his chosen battle style was so strange and elusive. Unlike most styles, which started with certain movements and steps, this one was supposed to imitate any movement and any step instead of introducing its own.

So it was more about the state of mind and the flexibility of his physical behavior. Sunny had to create a set of training exercises that would allow his body and muscle memory to become capable of adapting to any style and turn pliable like a shadow.

On the first day of trying, his whole body ached. Despite his incredible physical shape and experience with tough training, Sunny ended up straining the muscles that he didn't even know he had, and force those that he did know about to behave in a way that was utterly different from what they were used to.

Actually, his previous training was even detrimental to the whole process. He had to make himself unlearn a lot of things to allow for this strange style to take root in his very bones. Thankfully, the foundation of his technique was Changing Star's flowing style, which itself was designed for maximum adaptability.

If Sunny learned another style or was further into mastering any existing technique, this would have been ten times harder, if not impossible.

…Needless to say, his exercises were in no way similar to the beautiful and graceful dance he had seen in his dream. In fact, from the side, Sunny must have looked as though he was having a seizure. He caught more than one amused stare while practicing.

It didn't matter.

The only thing that mattered was that he was slowly pushing himself toward mastering the basics of Shadow Dance... and, hopefully, receiving his first Relic.

Chapter-226: The Fool

On the evening of the first of the two days that they had at their disposal, Sunny climbed all the way to the highest point of the statue and sat there alone, looking at the setting sun.

He felt as though he had to find a sense of balance that he had lost at some point along the way. Not because he missed it, but because he was going to need that balance to remain firm and steady when the moment of truth came.

If he was right about the future, then this was probably the last day of peace he would experience until this whole thing was over. Not only the expedition…

But all of it.

Looking back, his behavior in these past few months was highly erratic. Where were the cold rationality and ruthlessness that saved him so many times in the past? The caution and devious cunning that allowed him to survive the First Nightmare? He had not been acting like himself for a long time.

Yes, his mental state had suffered greatly because of everything that had happened. But was it the only reason?

Come to think of it…

The first blow dealt to him was the bitter revelation that there was no Gateway in the Bright Castle.

After everything that Sunny had endured to make it to the Dark City, the crushing intensity of their journey through the Labyrinth, the diabolical trap of the Soul Devourer and their escape from it, the cold and harrowing night of traversing the dark sea… all of it turned out to have been for nothing.

Not only were they not rewarded for their efforts, but all of their hopes were mercilessly destroyed and obliterated instead.

This alone was enough to drive a person mad.

Then came the feeling of alienation he felt while living with Nephis, Cassie, and all the newcomers in the outer settlement. Instead of finding support and solace in the company of his friends, Sunny fell into his old habit. Unconsciously, he turned himself into an outcast to prevent anyone from making him one.

This was the most noticeable, but not the only instance of him regressing to his old self. After fighting so hard to change and grow, Sunny ended up abandoning most of the lessons he had learned after becoming infected by the Nightmare Spell.

He was almost like an addict relapsing after a few days of sobriety and giving up completely because of this one small mistake.

But who could blame him?

Sunny was already shaking under the pressure of the situation. One little push, and he would fall under its weight.

In the end, it was not one, but three blows that shattered him completely. As though the world wanted to make sure that he was truly broken.

First was the terrible epiphany of what Cassie's vision really meant. Almost instantly after that, while Sunny was still reeling, came the fatal mistake in the conversation with Harper and the brutal murder that followed. And if that was not enough, the person he relied on the most to keep his sanity in this cursed place, Nephis, made it impossible for him to trust her any longer.

Anyone would have collapsed under that weight. And yet Sunny managed to keep his balance, even if just barely.

The final straw that finally broke him was the excruciating, neverending sea of torturous pain he suffered after being mortally wounded by the Black Knight.

After that, Sunny had relinquished all pretense of having control.

And now here he was. Playing the fool, acting like a fool, and fooling around with Kai and Effie. Wasn't it fun? Wasn't it easy?

Yes, his mental state wasn't great.

But it was also very convenient to blame everything on this condition. The truth of it…

The truth of it was that Sunny did not try to reign himself in at all. In fact, he welcomed this madness. Being a bit crazy was comforting, simple, and safe.

It protected him from having to look at the heartbreaking truth and remember it. Sunny needed the shield of madness to save himself from the bottomless despair that threatened to destroy him completely.

So what if he was prone to act recklessly in this state? So what if he made mistakes here and there and took unnecessary risks? Anything was better than having to face that despair.

Just like Nephis had said, one had to become a little insane to survive in the world that had gone mad.

…And yet, Sunny knew that what he was doing was nothing but hiding his head in the sand.

And now that the end was approaching, he had to stop hiding from the truth. He had to admit and endure it.

This was the only way for him to survive.

…As the sun disappeared behind the horizon and the absolute darkness drowned the Forgotten Shore, he sighed deeply and whispered:

"Alright. Alright. It's time to wake up."

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The next day, six humans were standing at the edge of the vast canyon as the twilight of dusk drowned the world in shadows. Far below them, the black waters of the cursed sea were raging, rising from the depths in a terrifying, obliterating wave.

In a few minutes, all light was going to be completely gone. And then, the flood of darkness would wash over the world, destroying anyone left standing in its path.

…And yet, the humans were not rushing to get away. Instead, they just stood there and waited.

Looking down into the canyon, Sunny gritted his teeth and shivered. Then, he glanced at Nephis and licked his dry lips.

"Are you sure about this?"

Changing Star did not spare him a look and simply nodded. Despite the fact that the rising black water was quickly approaching them, her face was calm and composed.

A moment later, the last vestiges of sunlight disappeared, leaving them in utter darkness. The silence that surrounded them was broken only by the sound of waves rushing against the walls of the canyon.

Getting closer and closer.

"Prepare yourselves."

Sunny sighed.

'Here we go.'

Suddenly, a blinding burst of white light pierced the darkness. Holding the incandescent sword in her hand, Nephis closed her shining eyes for a second…

And then raised the sword high above her head, as if calling the monsters of the depths to come take her.

Chapter-227: Comparatively Safe

The embrace of impenetrable darkness was broken by the furious white light of Changing Star's incandescent sword. Illuminated by it, six people were standing on the shore of a raging river. Their faces were pale and grim.

The canyon had disappeared, consumed by the rising surge of the black water. Now, the cursed sea was flowing over its edges, ready to swell and flood the narrow passages of the great Labyrinth in an unstoppable wave.

Sunny felt cold water wash over his feet and shivered. The rest of the cohort reacted exactly the same — even Kai, who could escape into the lightless skies at any moment, seemed to be deeply unnerved by the closeness of the encroaching sea.

Among the six of them, only three had truly experienced the perils of this dark abyss. They knew that the real dread came not from the sea itself, but from the terrors that hid in its cursed depths.

Like the host of the whispering voices that they had heard beneath the branches of the Soul Tree.

Or the gargantuan creature that had almost cost Nephis her life.

However, Sunny was not going to make a remark to educate the rest of the cohort. After all, what they were trying to do right now was to summon one of these terrors from below.

One that was different from all the others.

"Sunny?"

Peering into the darkness, he lingered.

"I don't see anything… yet."

The water was already to his shins and rising swiftly. Sunny grimaced and struggled with the desire to turn around and run away without looking back.

If he was fast enough… if he was lucky enough… he could still make it to the giant statue before the torrent of darkness drowned him under its crushing weight.

Instead, Sunny glanced at Nephis and Cassie.

The blind girl had glimpsed this secret of the Forgotten Shore in her visions and shared it with Changing Star. Changing Star had devised a plan to make use of it.

Both of them were confident that they were going to succeed. So, he was going to be confident, too.

Sunny didn't fully trust either of his former companions, not anymore. But he trusted their judgment.

….Just as that thought appeared in his mind, there was a subtle movement at the edges of his vision. Turning his head, Sunny stared into the darkness… and trembled.

"...It's here."

Out there in the distance, a massive shape was moving through the waves, attracted by the light of Changing Star's incandescent blade. The sea seethed and swirled around it, the black mass of water easily pushed away by the approaching creature.

Nephis gritted her teeth and somehow made her flames burn even brighter, forcing the darkness to retreat another dozen steps.

"Get ready!"

A few moments later, the furious sounds of a massive body moving through the dark water reached their ears. The creature was a true

giant, easily towering above the waves even though it was walking on the bottom of the canyon.

…Well, no surprise.

Full of terror and awe, Sunny watched as the thing they were waiting for came closer. Soon, he could discern the general shape of it.

Two hills that rose above water were its shoulders. And right between them, where the head should have been…

There was nothing but emptiness.

There were seven headless statues on the Forgotten Shore, but only six marks on the map created by Nephis. Not because she had failed to learn of the seventh one…

But because the seventh statue never stayed in one place for too long.

And now, that stone colossus was walking through the flooded canyon, his shoulder scraping against one of its walls. The wide chest of the headless giant pushed the water away, creating whirlpools in his wake.

Raising one colossal arm, the statue easily destroyed the protruding remnants of the ancient bridge that got in its way. The debris rained into the black waves, disappearing into them without a trace.

This… this was their fast and safe — comparatively — method of traveling to the edges of the Forgotten Shore.

'Truly insane,' Sunny thought, stunned by the sheer scale of everything that was happening.

Come to think of it, it was really ironic. The next day after he had decided to return to some semblance of sanity, something this crazy was about to transpire.

It was as though the whole world was mocking him.

Shaking his head, Sunny turned to the cohort and yelled:

"He's coming!"

The black water was already to their knees. The members of the cohort tensed and prepared themselves for what was about to come.

They only had one chance to do this. Failure meant death.

A few moments later, the massive shape of the stone colossus entered the circle of light created by Nephis. Its shoulders rose above the waves, close enough to the now invisible shore of the flooded canyon for them to see every tiny crack on the surface of the weathered stone.

Not wasting any time, Changing Star ran forward and jumped. A moment later, the blade of her sword hit the surface of the statue and slid deep into it, as if melting the ancient stone. Using the sword as purchase, Nephis started to climb to the giant's shoulder.

The other members of the cohort were following closely behind her. Kai was carrying Cassie in his arms, flying to the top of the colossus with no problem at all. Caster seemed to simply disappear and appear a moment later on the giant's shoulder, standing side by side with Changing Star.

…Only Sunny was having trouble. With him not being very tall and the water level rising with each second, he found it hard to gain enough momentum for a proper jump.

'Damn... how irritating...'

However, before he could come up with a solution, Effie simply grabbed him by the collar… and tossed Sunny into the air.

'W—what?!'

For a few short moments, Sunny was flying. All he could hear was wind whistling in his ears.

Then, he landed on top of the giant statue, rolled, and barely prevented himself from falling back into the cold embrace of the dark sea. Before he could even stand up, the mighty huntress landed near him and grinned.

"Such a light…"

However, before she could finish the phrase, the stone colossus moved, making everyone stumble and fall.

Leaving the ruins of the bridge behind, he turned around and indifferently began walking away from it.

He was walking south.

Chapter-228: Crossing the Canyon

The stone colossus wandered the Forgotten Shore aimlessly for thousands of years. Cassie did not know what power had brought him to life, nor what he was searching for in the depths of the dark sea.

She had seen a vision of the headless giant passing the ruins of the ancient bridge on a certain day and then traveling south to the very edges of this desolate land. She also knew that the leader of the cohort that had conquered the Bright Castle pursued the seventh statue across the Labyrinth for a long time before leaving on his doomed journey.

His reasons for doing so were, presumably, unknown.

Sunny wasn't sure that the blind girl had told him the whole truth about the wandering colossus. In fact, he was certain that there was a deeper layer of secrets surrounding the seven ancient statues and their importance to the riddle of the Forgotten Shore.

However, he was in no hurry to hunt these secrets down. Sunny knew that all three of them — Nephis, Cassie, and himself — were bound together to this cursed place. The strings of fate were wrapped around them tightly, stretching far into the future, where the final revelations waited. He was going to learn the truth sooner or later.

Until then, Sunny was content knowing no more than he needed to know.

…The stone giant walked across the dark sea, cutting its surface with his wide chest. The six humans were gathered on the circular platform of his severed neck, pressing themselves against the swaying stone. The cold water was spraying into their faces and the furious winds were threatening to throw them off the moving statue into the

deadly waves below.

Nephis had long extinguished her flames, so they were surrounded by absolute darkness. Sunny was the only one who could see what was happening around them, so his role was to serve as the eyes of the cohort.

Using the strength of the shadow to hold onto the slippery stones, he looked forward with a grim expression on his face.

Currently, there was only one thought on his mind.

Were they going to make it in time?

The colossus was swiftly approaching the other side of the canyon. Sunny could identify it by the remnants of the ancient bridge that were still above the turbulent black waves. However, the water level was rising much faster.

"Sunny?!"

Looking toward Effie, who called out his name, he lingered for a few moments and then yelled:

"Prepare yourself! We're going to be underwater for a couple of minutes, at least!"

A chorus of curses served as the answer.

Unseen by anyone, Sunny smiled darkly.

This was going to be his second time diving into the dark sea. Wasn't this how Gunlaug had begun his journey to the throne of the Dark City?

Maybe Sunny would be a king himself, one day.

"...Now!"

The black water rose higher and higher. The shoulders of the giant were already submerged in its lightless depths. The circular platform was going to be next.

They were so close to the shore…

As the stone colossus moved across the bottom of the canyon, the platform rose and fell. After another fall, it was finally lost beneath the waves.

The cold, salty water crashed into them and then swallowed the entire world. The members of the cohort desperately held onto the cracks in the stone, trying to prevent themselves from being washed away by the raging current.

No one would be able to save them if they were.

Sunny closed his eyes, knowing that he would not be able to see anything through the impenetrable darkness of the cursed sea. Instead, he relied on his Shadow Sense, hoping that it was going to help him feel if something approached them from the depths.

Now, all Sunny had to do was hold tight and hope that the headless giant would reach the shore of the canyon before he ran out of breath.

Thankfully, everyone present was strong and powerful. Their physical form was either at the pinnacle of human ability or slightly above it. Several minutes underwater were not going to kill them… most likely.

Placating himself with this thought, Sunny waited, and waited, and waited, struggling against the terrible current with all his strength. At some point, he thought that he sensed an unclear shape swim close to the walking statue, but then the sensation disappeared.

'Any second now… any second…'

But the relief he was so desperately waiting for was not coming for far longer than Sunny had expected. Soon, his lungs began to burn, and his muscles began to spasm.

'Damnation…'

If he was having trouble, then others must have been in far worse shape. After all, oxygen traveled through human bodies with blood,

and their blood had not been altered and comprehensively enhanced by the forbidden legacy of the mysterious Weaver.

Just as he thought so, Sunny felt one of the six shadows slipping from the circular platform.

It was Kai…

'Crap!'

Fortunately, before the colossus plunged into the dark depths, the charming archer had been worried about Cassie and tied himself to her with the help of the golden rope. Surprisingly, the blind girl turned out to be more resilient than him in the end. Now, she was holding both of their weights, desperately grabbing onto a narrow crack in the ancient stone.

Kai's unconscious body was floating a few meters behind her. He was safe, for now.

But how long would Cassie herself be able to hold on?

…When Sunny felt his mind weakening, his body was suddenly slammed into the platform with tremendous force.

The stone giant was climbing out of the canyon. His massive hands grabbed onto the edge of it, and with one devastating pull, the colossus threw himself upward.

'Ugh… curse it!'

Sunny felt as though he was aboard the worst amusement ride in human history. His bones groaned, being pressed down upon by an invisible weight.

A few moments of this torture, and they were above water once again.

Desperately grasping for air, Sunny inhaled several times and then weakly looked at the unconscious form of Kai. Crawling toward the archer, he grabbed him and dragged the body back to the rest of the group.

Entrusting him to Cassie, Sunny looked down at the dark water below… and suddenly growled in a low voice.

Turning her head, Nephis asked with a deep frown on her pale face:

"Sunny? What is it?"

Looking at the torso of the giant statue, he gritted his teeth and lingered for a few moments before answering.

Then, in a voice that was dreadfully grim, Sunny said:

"...We have a passenger."

Chapter-229: The Passenger

The colossus rose from beneath the turbulent waves, rivers of black water streaming down his stone body. Now that the walking statue had climbed out of the canyon, the cursed sea was barely up to its abdomen… for the moment.

Once the dark waters reached higher, the giant would be submerged in them up to his shoulders once again.

Sunny had to get rid of the unwelcomed passenger until then.

Far below, flattened against the chest of the colossus, a strange creature had attached itself to the ancient statue. It looked like a cross between a translucent jellyfish and an eel. However, Sunny could see a deformed skeleton of a giant humanoid being trapped within the transparent flesh of the repulsive abomination.

He shivered.

Compared to the stone giant, the eel looked rather small… however, this was just an illusion. Really, the creature was as large as a train. Its jaws were full of sharp fangs and wide enough to swallow a human whole.

'Curses.'

If there was one good thing about the situation, it was that the eel did not seem to be a Corrupted Nightmare Creature, but merely a Fallen one. Perhaps it survived in the cursed sea by attaching itself to the true terrors of the depths and feeding off the remains of their prey.

As soon as Nephis spoke, Sunny noticed long feelers of the creature tremble and move, as though reacting to the sudden sound. The eel turned its head slightly in their direction.

When he answered, the feelers rippled once again, and the monstrosity turned its head once more, this time staring directly at Sunny.

'Crap…'

A moment later, translucent tentacles appeared from beneath the abomination's body and shot up, finding cracks in the weathered stone and pulling it toward the neck of the colossus.

…Where the cohort was.

Changing Star must have felt something, because tiny white sparks suddenly ignited in the depths of her eyes.

Sunny put a hand on her shoulder and shook his head.

"Don't."

Stone giant or not, lighting a beacon in the middle of the cursed sea was not the best of ideas. Now that it had escaped the confines of the canyon, the real horrors were out and about. Just like the cohort had discussed before, light was their last resort, something they would summon only if the moment came where there was no other choice but for all of them to fight.

And whether Sunny liked it or not, that moment was not upon them yet.

With a reluctant scowl, he turned away and said:

"I'll handle it."

…The giant eel was his problem to solve.

'Yeah, that's great and all. But how the Spell am I supposed to get rid of this thing?'

Looking down, Sunny calculated that he had a dozen or so seconds left before it was time to act. The repulsive abomination was slowly crawling toward them, scaling the torso of the giant statue at a disturbingly steady pace.

'Think, think…'

Several seconds later, Sunny approached Effie and kneeled by her side. Taking the huntress by the hand, he put something into her palm and said:

"Do you feel the colossus moving up and down? That's his steps. I need you to start counting them. If I'm not back after thirty steps, throw the thing I gave you in that direction as hard as you can. Alright?"

Effie gave him a nod. Her usual humor was gone, replaced by grim determination.

"Good. Well… wish me luck."

The huntress lingered for a moment and then said:

"Good luck."

When he was ready to walk away, she suddenly gripped his arm.

Sunny stopped and raised an eyebrow.

"What?"

Effie hesitated before speaking.

"Listen, Sunny… if… if you die… I can have your soul shards, right?"

He stared at her for a second, his face twitching.

'This wench!'

"Absolutely not! If I die, all my shards are to be thrown into the sea. No one is to get anything, understand?"

With that, he left the cohort behind and walked to the edge of the swaying stone platform.

'...Here goes nothing.'

Jumping down, Sunny slid to the giant's shoulder and caught himself

from falling all the way into the raging waves by grabbing onto a crack in the stone. To his right, the shoulder was slowly moving as the colossus swung his hand. To his left, a curved path of stone led all the way across the chest of the statue to its other shoulder.

This curving path was, in fact, the collar of the giant's tunic, carved masterfully from stone by the unknown sculptor. Stepping on it, Sunny struggled to keep his balance on the swaying slippery surface and hurried forward.

Soon, he was directly above the climbing eel. The abomination was already close, allowing Sunny to discern every repugnant detail of its translucent, giant body.

'What the hell. Why does everything have to be so disgusting?'

A moment later, he sighed.

'Let's… try this.'

Summoning the Prowling Thorn, Sunny gritted his teeth and cut his forearm, smearing some blood on the blade of the kunai. Then, he used all the strength he had in his body to hurl the dagger down.

The Prowling Thorn spun in the air and hit the giant eel right in the place where its eye should have been. Sunny did not notice any visual organs on the creature's body, but on the deformed humanoid skull hiding beneath the flesh, that's where the eye socket was.

The kunai wedged itself deep into the monster's head, causing a small fountain of crimson blood to erupt upward. Of course, such a tiny wound was nothing for a creature of this size. For a moment, everything became silent.

…Then, hundreds of slender tentacles suddenly exploded from the eel's flesh and shot in Sunny's direction in a chaotic, slithering mass of translucent flesh.

'Damn it!'

Forced to dismiss the Prowling Thorn to avoid being thrown off the ledge, Sunny lunged forward. A moment later, the tentacles reached

his previous position and crashed into the stone, sending shards flying into the air.

Sunny kept running, knowing that the tentacles were just a second away from piercing him. The sounds of breaking stone were thundering just behind his back, getting closer and closer with each moment. The Prowling Thorn appeared in his hand one again.

Reaching the end of the path and with nowhere left to run, Sunny cursed… and jumped straight into the darkness.

Chapter-230: Precarious Battle

The eel tried to catch him, but was a second too late.

"Crap!"

Falling toward the dark waves, Sunny threw the kunai in the direction of the stone giant's hand.

Instead of a weapon, the colossus was holding a tool that resembled a mason's hammer. The kunai curved in the air and wrapped the invisible string around its shaft.

'This is going to hurt!'

Sunny plunged into the darkness. A moment later, the string drew taut, and he found himself swinging through the air at a terrible speed. Flying underneath the colossal stone fist, he almost touched the black water with his feet, but then the inertia pulled him up and away.

After a few seconds of weightlessness, Sunny landed on the hammer's head and let out a shaky breath. Without wasting any time, he dislodged the Prowling Thorn and pulled it into his hand, then wedged the dagger in a narrow crack on the surface of the giant hammer.

Landing on it was one thing. Staying here, though… that was something else entirely.

The colossus was swinging his arms as he walked, so Sunny basically found himself on top of a giant pendulum. Not only was the hammer swaying back and forth, but the angle of the surface he was standing on also constantly changed, making it hard not to fly off or slid into the raging sea.

Almost kneeling, Sunny held onto the kunai and tried to keep himself from falling. Then, his face pale and grim, he looked up and glanced at the eel.

"I'm right here, you slimy worm!"

The abomination lingered for a few moments, considering whether it should continue to climb up or follow the sound made by the prey. Finally, it twisted its long, repulsive body and slid over the shoulder of the giant, crawling down his arm.

Toward Sunny.

'Come on, come on!'

He was hoping that his blood will have the same effect on the giant eel as it had on the Corpse Eater. Both were, presumably, Fallen creatures. If one was poisoned to death by Blood Weave, why couldn't the other?

Sunny had not cut himself with the Prowling Thorn for the fun of it.

…Sadly, his blood seemed to have no effect on the eel whatsoever. The monster continued to pursue its prey without showing any signs of being poisoned.

'So… it's not poisonous, really. It just tore that leech from inside because the stupid thing swallowed a whole lot, and the Weave embued my blood with the odd quality of always being attracted back to the larger mass of it. The Corpse Eater's innards were in the way, so... Damn it!'

His hopes of killing the eel were crushed. Now, Sunny was stuck on the swinging hammer, with his only path of escape blocked by the swiftly approaching abomination.

"Damn it all!"

Letting go of the kunai, Sunny summoned the Midnight Shard and slashed at the slender tentacle that approached him. Even enhanced by the shadow, the blade of the tachi failed to cut the flesh of the Fallen creature, and instead simply batted it away.

'Not good, not good…'

The eel had two types of tentacles. Some were thick, powerful, and few in number. These ones were used to push its massive body forward and hold onto the swinging arm of the colossus.

The other tentacles were slender, long, and numerous. These were the ones that Sunny now had to dodge and fight against.

The closer the eel got, the more tentacles assaulted Sunny from all sides. Dodging and deflecting them while maintaining his balance on the chaotically swinging hammer was an almost impossible task.

Luckily, Sunny had practiced the firm battle style of the Stone Saint and incorporated it into his own technique. Its steadiness and indomitability were translated through grounded footwork, which allowed him to plant himself on the stone surface of the hammer and refuse to be thrown off or moved even by an inch.

Between choking breaths, Sunny couldn't help but think that Nephis was right. The best fighters weren't those who were the strongest, but those who were the most adaptable.

The foundational style he had learned from her had served him well on the streets of the Dark City. But if he had continued to follow it narrowly and neglected to add flexibility to his technique by incorporating the Stone Saint's style into it, he would be dead by now.

The Dream Realm was wild, unpredictable, and often defied logic. It threw all kinds of horrors at those unfortunate enough to step foot inside its vast expanse. Take this situation, for example… what kind of a person would imagine that, one day, they would have to fight a translucent eel the size of a train atop a walking stone colossus?

Sunny certainly never expected to find himself in such a situation. Only a complete lunatic would.

That's why adaptability was the most important trait an Awakened fighter could possess.

…But even though Sunny had taken all the right steps, the seconds

he had left to live were numbered. The onslaught of the slender tentacles was already too much for him to handle. And they were only growing in number.

'Twenty-eight.'

With an inaudible sigh, Sunny allowed the shadow to slide off his body and rush toward the approaching eel. Instantly weakened, he gritted his teeth and tried to resist the attacking tentacles as best as he could.

One of them hit against the blade of the Midnight Shard with tremendous force, sending it flying from his hand into the darkness of the night.

The other hit him across the chest, causing Sunny to yelp in pain and roll back, almost sliding off the surface of the hammer. Catching himself at the last moment, he pushed away and rolled, barely avoiding being pierced through the chest by the third.

He had nowhere to retreat anymore…

But it was fine.

'Twenty-nine.'

Back at the circular platform, Effie strained her muscles and hurled the thing entrusted to her by Sunny into the air.

It was the Ordinary Rock.

Flying away, the Memory suddenly screamed:

"Thirty steps!"

Its loud scream caused the feelers on the eel's head to ripple. The giant creature suddenly turned its head in the direction of the noise, its terrifying maw opening in hunger.

For a moment, it paid Sunny no attention.

Its weight also shifted, leaning over the abyss of black water.

Right then, a human shadow glided right in front of it, and two crimson eyes ignited in its depths. The Stone Saint stepped out of the shadow, which then instantly wrapped itself around the taciturn monster and filled her with immeasurable power.

The Shadow's sword flashed.

Sunny wasn't trying to kill the eel. Despite all of the Stone Saint's might, she was too weak to slay something that abominable.

He just wanted to sever one of the main tentacles that supported most of the eel's weight.

Augmented with the power of shadows, the stone knight easily cut into the flesh of the eel and sliced one of the thickest tentacles apart. Losing its purchase, the repulsive creature shuddered… and slid helplessly from the swinging arm of the colossus, falling into the turbulent black waves with a splash.

Then, it was gone, pulled away by the strong current.

Sunny fell to his knees and drew in a deep breath.

Then, he said in a cold, raspy voice:

"This ride ain't free, bastard. Next time, buy a ticket."

Chapter-231: Stone Giant

Sunny remained on the swinging hammer of the colossus for a while, resting and trying to catch his breath. However, very soon, the dark sea rose high enough to make his position perilous.

With a deep sigh, he stood up and dislodged the Prowling Thorn from the stones. Waiting for the colossus to raise his hand, Sunny jumped down. The wind whistled in his ears, and a few moments later, he landed on the wrist of the giant in a roll. As soon as Sunny got back to his feet, the stone surface beneath plummeted down.

Thrusting the kunai in another crack, he gritted his teeth and held on to his dear life. Soon, the ground he was standing on sloped down, and then turned into a vertical wall, with nothing but the dark abyss of the cursed sea visible below. Hanging off that wall, Sunny cursed and waited for the colossus to bring his arm back up.

When it finally happened, Sunny immediately dashed forward. He had several precious seconds before the pendulum swung again, and had to cover as much distance as possible with each swing of the giant's arm.

Too slow, and the cursed sea would catch up to him.

The closer he got to the elbow of the walking statue, the more inclined his path was. Eventually, Sunny had to climb instead of run. His hands were tired from fighting and supporting his weight, but he stubbornly continued moving forward and up.

Once Sunny reached the elbow and climbed higher, the amplitude of the swinging reduced considerably. Now he just had to scale the vertical wall and reach the shoulder of the giant.

Climbing the slippery stone was not easy, but he had gotten used to such tasks a long time ago. In any case, it was way better than that

time Sunny had to race against the rising sea during a furious storm, only to get swept away by the black water and be saved by Nephis at the last moment.

This time, at least, he didn't need her to save his life.

That would be embarrassing...

Some time later, Sunny climbed over the edge of the circular platform, crawled to its center, and sprawled beside the other members of the cohort, who were waiting for his return with tense expressions on their faces.

"Sunny? Are you alright?"

Kai was back to his senses, looking a little bit disheveled, but still ridiculously gorgeous. Sunny stared at him in dismay, then sighed.

"...I'm alive."

A short while later, Nephis called out to him:

"What were you fighting?"

Sunny grimaced.

"A big ugly worm. I threw him back into the water."

With that, he reluctantly sat up and looked at the surface of the dark sea, which was already flowing over the shoulders of the stone giant.

Its surface was black and tranquil. No one was pursuing them, it seemed.

"It's gone now, so rest up. I'll keep watch."

***

He stayed awake until the break of dawn and then woke the members of the cohort. When they rose to their feet, Sunny lay down on the cold stone and tiredly closed his eyes.

Yesterday, he had thought that he would not be able to fall asleep

atop the walking stone giant. However, Sunny had underestimated how exhausting this long night would end up being. Even the body of a powerful Sleeper needed rest.

Actually, the swinging of the stone platform was sort of soothing. Soon, he was fast asleep.

…When Sunny woke up, the sun was already high in the sky. Yawning, he sat up, summoned the Endless Spring and greedily drank some water. Someone had left a plate of food near him, so without thinking too much, Sunny picked it up and had himself a late breakfast.

'Ah, that hits the spot.'

Recognizing the taste of Neph's cooking, he glanced at their intrepid leader and smiled.

It was nice to laze around while others were working.

While Sunny was sleeping, the stone platform had transformed. Plates of iron stripped off the abominable spiders and stored in Effie's bag were inserted around its perimeter, with the golden rope strung between them as an improvised railing. More of these plates were shaped into makeshift rods and placed in the center to serve as throwing spears in case the cohort was attacked from the air.

Currently, Kai and Effie were building additional battlements on the left shoulder of the giant while Nephis observed their progress from above.

They were taking no chances. A trip through the Labyrinth, no matter how fantastical, was still full of danger. It was better to be safe than sorry.

Sunny scoffed.

'So much work. What's the wors… uh, no. I'm not going to finish that thought. No thanks!'

On the stone beside him, the shadow applauded sarcastically.

Shaking his head, Sunny finished his food in silence and moved to the edge of the platform to look down at the vista of the Forgotten Shore.

Far below, the landscape of the Labyrinth was slowly moving past them. The stone giant was marching south, indifferently crushing mountains of crimson coral under his feet with each step. The view was simultaneously hypnotic and depressing.

In every direction, as far away as Sunny could see, there was nothing but red coral, with rare heights protruding from it into the grey skies here and there. The Forgotten Shore was truly vast.

And every inch of it was full of unspeakable dangers.

Not too far from him, Caster was also busy studying the landscape. However, his interest wasn't purely idle. Changing Star's map was on the stones beside him, and the proud Legacy was drawing new marks on it from time to time.

Sunny sighed.

The cohort might have caught a ride on the shoulder of the stone giant to reach their destination at the edges of the Forgotten Shore, but they were going to have to walk all the way back to the Dark City by themselves.

That was months of traveling through this treacherous hellscape, with nothing but their own strength and wit to keep them alive. The information Caster was putting on the map today was going to be priceless to them in the future.

…But that was a problem for tomorrow.

Right now, Sunny deserved a little respite.

Turning away from the handsome young man, he lowered his gaze and peered at the sights below.

...It was not every day that one got an opportunity to enjoy a beautiful view of hell.

Chapter-232: Before the Storm

In the next few hours, Sunny did nothing but leisurely gaze at the vistas of the Labyrinth. While monotonous, they were still picturesque and breathtaking.

The Forgotten Shore was a harrowing, but beautiful place. The somber grey sky and the black earth created a perfect backdrop for the vibrant crimson sea of twisting coral blades. Here and there, strange landmarks broke the dullness of the landscape, igniting the flames of curiosity in Sunny's heart.

After all, he was nothing if not a passionate explorer.

Provided, most of his explorations ended with something dying at the end of his blade. But still…

Out there in the depths of the Labyrinth, Sunny saw many things that piqued his interest.

The skeletal remains of colossal monsters, with signs of ferocious battles written in the marks on their bones. Broken wrecks of giant vessels, with terrible breaches in their mighty hulls. Abyssal chasms that were full of darkness and emptiness, leading into the depths of this cursed land where true horrors dwelt. And things he couldn't even describe, let alone identify.

He even saw several vast ruins that must have been entire cities once. Now, only unclear shapes of magnificent buildings remained, overgrown with crimson coral and barely resembling anything made by a human hand.

He didn't know if they had existed before or simultaneously with the Dark City. Regardless, it seemed that no other human settlement on the Forgotten Shore had withstood the curse of darkness as the cursed city had.

They were all destroyed and devoured, first by the crimson coral, then by the ruthless flow of time. Now, no one was left to remember that these proud cities had ever existed.

The seven heroes that created the Starlight Legion were described as those born in all-consuming darkness. That suggested that humans had resisted the curse for a while, at least. Maybe the Dark City was built long after the darkness had devoured this land, as the last sanctuary and fortress for those who remained.

…A lot of good had that done, in the end.

His reverie was broken by Cassie, who suddenly turned south and frowned. Her quick movement drew everyone's attention.

Sunny instantly had a bad feeling.

Nephis turned to the blind girl and frowned.

"Cassie? Do you feel something?"

Cassia lingered for a few moments and then said, her voice uncertain:

"I think… I think a storm is coming."

Sunny looked at the sky, which like always was covered in a grey veil of clouds. Nothing seemed to indicate that there was going to be a tempest turning it impenetrably dark and furious soon.

But that was just how things worked on the Forgotten Shore. Storms came out of nowhere and destroyed everyone unfortunate enough to be caught in their murderous embrace.

If Cassie said that she felt one approaching, then it was. Their oracle had a good track record of sensing such things.

'Damn...'

A storm meant that the cursed sea would rise from the depths earlier than usual. It also meant that there would be rain and lightning, which would make the behavior of the dwellers of the depths unpredictable.

It also meant hurricane winds, and that was really bad news when you were stuck on a moving colossus two hundred meters above the ground.

Nephis gritted her teeth.

"You heard her. Prepare…"

However, the blind girl interrupted her.

"Wait. There is something else."

Changing Star lingered for a moment, then asked:

"You are sensing another threat?"

Cassie scowled, then said in a strange tone.

"No, not sensing. I just… I can hear something strange. It's like a rustle."

Everyone stared at her for a few seconds, trying to understand the meaning behind her words.

Strangely, Kai was the first one to react. Suddenly pale, he spun around and summoned his bow. Before anyone could understand what was happening, something whistled in the air, and a dark shape forcefully crashed into the stone platform, smearing it with blood. A black arrow was protruding from its body.

Sunny jumped out of the way and gasped, stunned by the force with which the monster impacted against the stone. It had to have been in a long dive before being pierced by Kai's arrow, mere moments away from snatching one of them away.

The creature looked somewhat like a giant locust. Its body was covered in black chitin and comparatively small, no bigger than that of an adult human. Its wide wings were thin and transparent. As it convulsed in death throes, the wings moved, threatening to push the members of the cohort off of the platform. Nephis dashed forward, grabbed the disgusting creature and threw it down.

Kai was already grabbing another arrow. There was an expression of panic on his face.

Sunny blinked.

'Why is he panicking? The monster is already…'

As though hearing his thoughts, Kai glanced at the members of the cohort with wide eyes and yelled:

"Swarms! These fiends hunt in swarms! Get ready!"

Before he could finish, Sunny was already summoning the Midnight Shard and the Stone Saint.

'...dead!'

By now, everyone could hear the rustling sound Cassie had told them about. It seemed to be coming from nowhere, surrounding them like a wave. For a few moments, nothing happened. The members of the cohort tensely stared up, wai…

Suddenly, a black dot appeared in the grey clouds and swiftly fell down, covering the distance to the neck of the colossus almost instantly. Before it could attack, though, Effie's spear collided with it. The giant locust practically exploded, sending a rain of blood splattering against the stone back of the colossus.

But by the time the huntress dismissed her spear and before she had the time to summon it again, there was another dot, and another, and another…

Kai shot one more creature out of the air, while Caster used a strange sling he summoned from his Soul Sea to break the wings of another. Nephis raised her sword and yelled:

"Cassie! Wind!"

Flinching, the blind girl began to call upon her wooden staff.

While white sparks of light were still weaving the shape of it in her hands, the Quiet Dancer flew out of its scabbard by itself and flashed

into the air, piercing an approaching locust clean through.

A few moments later, a powerful gale shot from the wooden staff into the skies, slowing the attacking locusts down and sending them staggering.

One of these stragglers somehow managed to land on the platform and immediately jumped at Sunny.

Changing his stance on the fly, Sunny slashed with his sword, decapitating the repulsive creature.

However, because of the inertia, the massive body continued to move forward, slamming into him at great speed.

With a curse, Sunny flew back and fell over the railing. Sliding on the stone, he rolled down to the stone giant's shoulder and caught himself on the part of the defensive fence built by Effie and Kai. Then, he stood up and spat a mouthful of blood.

A moment later, Sunny froze, his eyes widening.

Because of the tumble, he accidentally looked down to the ground. What he saw there made him shiver.

...Numerous dark shapes were appearing from the Labyrinth and jumping at the colossus, swiftly climbing up his giant stone body.

Chapter-233: Swarm

As the members of the cohort killed several giant locusts, their repulsive black bodies fell to the ground, raining blood on the walking colossus and the crimson coral of the Labyrinth.

As soon as their corpses hit the ground, it suddenly moved. Dark figures appeared from beneath the mud, rushing at the dead locusts to devour them. Hundreds of monsters were suddenly competing for the few scraps of meat. After several bloody fights broke out and the winners were decided, those who had not gotten to satiate their hunger turned their heads and followed the smell of blood.

…Right back to the moving stone giant.

Looking down with dark resentment, Sunny saw numerous creatures jumping at the legs of the walking statue from the mounds of coral and quickly climbing up. They were headed right to where the cohort was being besieged by the swarm of winged abominations.

He couldn't see the shape of them clearly, but there was no doubt that these monsters were bad news.

'Damnation…'

[...slain an awakened beast, Flesh Reaver.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

Turning around, Sunny summoned the Prowling Thorn and hurled it upward. A moment later, using the invisible string as support, he was flying through the air. Grabbing onto the edge of the circular platform, he hoisted himself up and once again faced the carnage.

The kunai flashed, cutting the wing of one of the locusts clean off. Suddenly crippled, the creature toppled and plummeted down, no

doubt to be devoured by the horde of Nightmare Creatures approaching from below.

The battle with the swarm was not going too great for the cohort. The turbulent winds summoned by Cassie's staff bought them some breathing room by making it hard for the locusts to approach the platform at high speed, but there were just too many of them.

Kai was setting one arrow after another loose. After that one first shot, he had not used the Blood Arrow, choosing instead to rely on his mundane ones. In the chaotic mess of this sudden battle, it was too easy to miss. Plus, he didn't need a lot of power to deliver debilitating wounds to the locusts.

They were basically skewering themselves on the arrows themselves by diving from the skies with incredible speed. Still, the abominable reavers were awakened beasts. It wasn't easy for a Sleeper to kill one with just a single shot.

Just as Sunny grabbed the kunai and spun to avoid a glancing blow from one of the creatures, another one landed on the platform. Two arrows were sticking from its cracked chitin, but the locust was still alive.

…Not for long, though.

Just a moment after the repulsive bug landed, Neph's sword flashed through the air, slicing it in half. Sending the mangled body off the platform with a powerful kick, Changing Star turned to Kai and yelled:

"Don't try to kill them! Break their wings!"

With a sudden light of understanding in his eyes, the archer changed his approach.

Indeed, that made sense. The members of the cohort didn't need to slay the locusts. They just needed to make it so the flying scourges weren't able to reach the stone platform.

Effie, meanwhile, did not need this advice. Everything she hit simply exploded into a disgusting puddle of bloody goo.

The problem the huntress faced was that there was no powerful ranged weapon she could use. Her beautiful spear was not really suited to be thrown that often.

The Memories were created from soul essence. Once a Memory was dismissed, that essence returned to the core of the Awakened that had summoned it. However, if it was too far away from them, the essence was simply wasted — unless the Memory had a special enchantment like that of the Blood Arrow.

The essence wasn't lost forever, as it would slowly accumulate inside the soul core until the peak capacity was reached once again. But this process took time, so one could not endlessly throw their Memories at the enemy during a battle. Especially not once they reached a rank where managing one's soul essence was of higher importance.

Effie had not reached such a rank yet, but she was still limited by that principle. That's why she resorted to using makeshift darts fashioned out of plates of spider iron. There wasn't much of them left, however. Once the last dart was gone, she would have to either exhaust her pool of soul essence or risk fighting the attacking locusts in melee.

Just like the Stone Saint was doing right now. As Sunny rushed toward Nephis, he noticed the Shadow lowering her shoulder and raising her shield. In the next moment, one of the repulsive creatures crashed into it at full speed… and simply crumbled, black blood exploding into the air through the cracks in the shattered chitin.

[You have slain…]

The huntress, however, did not have the benefit of weighing a literal ton. Despite her graceful appearance, the Saint was made out of stone, and stone was much heavier than flesh. It was also much harder to rip and slice apart. Once Effie was forced to fight the locusts with nothing but her spear and shield, her life would be in real danger.

'Curses, curses, curse it all!'

Swiftly approaching Changing Star, Sunny kicked a disgusting piece

of a killed creature off the platform and yelled:

"We have a problem!"

Nephis sharply looked at him and scowled.

"What?"

Sunny hesitated for a moment, and then gestured down.

"There's a couple of hundred Labyrinth creatures crawling all over the colossus. They'll be here pretty soon!"

Nephis gritted her teeth, then glanced at the members of the cohort.

Cassie was holding the wooden staff, sending powerful bursts of wind into the sky to slow down the attacking swarm. The Quiet Dancer was flashing through the air, protecting her from the locusts to the best of its ability. Caster was spinning his strange sling, aiming at the wings of the repulsive creatures. His face was calm and grim.

Everyone was barely holding on and one mistake away from death.

With a dark look in her cold grey eyes, Nephis looked at Sunny. Then, she said:

"...Come with me, then."

Chapter-234: Horde

Briefly giving Caster a few instructions, Nephis walked over to the edge of the platform and looked down. When she saw the numerous creatures climbing the stone giant, a grim expression appeared on her face.

Sunny weighed the Prowling Thorn in his hand and asked:

"So, what's the plan?"

Changing Star glanced at him and smiled darkly.

"What else? Kill as many as you can."

With that, she jumped down and landed softly on the shoulder of the colossus. With a sigh, Sunny followed.

'Figures!'

A moment later, they separated. Nephis dashed to the opposite side of the moving statue, running on the wide stone path of its collar. She was going to try and deal with those creatures that were climbing the front and the left side of the giant.

Sunny was going to have to stop those coming from the right and the back. He wasn't sure that just two of them were going to be enough to cover all that space, but they didn't have a lot of choices.

Sunny and Nephis at least had the high ground advantage against the enemy. Those fighting against the swarm of monstrous locusts, however, did not. The cohort couldn't spare anyone else for this task.

Looking down, he was finally able to discern the shape of the attacking Labyrinth dwellers. They looked like massive primates covered in dirty, grey fur. Their arms were strong and muscular,

easily pulling their heavy bodies up the ancient stone surface. Each had a mouth full of sharp teeth, with two curved tusks protruding from it, as long as daggers.

The most disturbing fact about these beasts was that there were crimson flowers growing from within the bloody gaps in their flesh. Some even had pale stems slithering from one eye socket to another. With a shiver, Sunny realized that this tribe of Nightmare Creatures were simply hosts for a different, much more terrifying one.

The primates were nothing but meat puppets for those ghoulish flowers.

'Oh gods…'

Summoning the Ordinary Rock, Sunny wrapped his body in the shadow, strained his muscles, and threw it down as hard as he could. The small rock plunged through the air and collided with one of the creatures far below, hitting it right in the forehead and splitting its rotten skull apart.

Not paying any attention to the fact that half of its head was missing, the primate continued climbing up.

Sunny gritted his teeth and dismissed the rock.

'...Just as I thought.'

Nothing could ever be simple on the Forgotten Shore. The cohort would never be just attacked by a swarm of flying abominations. There had to be a horde of monstrous primates attacking them from the ground, too! And gods forbid those powerful beasts were not parasitized by even more ghastly horrors.

'At least their bodies are not so tough due to their partially decomposed state.'

That was something he could work with…

Just as the first primate climbed into the range of the Prowling Thorn, something thundered above Sunny, and in the next moment, he was doused from head to toe in fetid black blood. A mangled

corpse of a giant locust flew past him and fell down.

Sunny frozen for a second, then growled.

'I am a walking target now, aren't I? Well… great! Let them come! The more, the merrier!'

***

Extending the invisible string to its maximum length, Sunny aimed and hurled the kunai down. He guided it by ever so slightly pulling on the string.

The dagger flashed through the air and spun, drawing a curved path. A few moments later, it cut across the wrist of one of the menacing primates, cleanly severing its hand.

Suddenly losing purchase, the beast instantly fell down. After plummeting from the deadly height, it hit the crimson corals below and practically exploded into bloody chunks.

Sunny listened to the emptiness, a tense expression on his face.

[You have slain an awakened monster, Blood Flower.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

A relieved expression appeared on his face. At least these things weren't indestructible…

Raising a hand, he caught the returning kunai and instantly threw it again.

There wasn't much time left.

Countless beasts were climbing up the stone body of the ancient colossus, covering a frightening amount of distance with each second. He had to slaughter as many of them as he could before they reached the battlement constructed on the giant's shoulder, or else they were going to rip him apart.

In the next few minutes, Sunny did nothing but control the Prowling

Thorn as it flew through the air, cutting through flesh and bone alike. The heavy kunai never stayed in his hand for more than a second, reaping a bountiful harvest of lives.

More than a dozen beasts — those who were ahead of the approaching horde — were thrown off the statue and fell to their deaths, rewarding Sunny with an enviable amount of shadow fragments.

However, he was still too slow. Sunny had to be both swift and precise when throwing the dagger, lest he wanted to be pulled off the giant's swaying shoulder himself. What's worse, he had to constantly pay attention to the sky and dodge the attacking locusts when they dove from above to devour him.

The horde of terrible beasts was getting closer and closer, their arrival as inevitable as it would be fatal.

The situation got even worse when another group of them reached the gargantuan statue's back. Now, Sunny not only had to deal with the monsters climbing its side, but also rush from his perch on the shoulder of the steadily moving colossus to the treacherous path of his collar to prevent the fastest climbers from reaching too high.

'Bad, bad, this is bad…'

Covered in blood and with his muscles burning, Sunny continued to slaughter the ghastly beasts as fast as he could.

But he wasn't fast enough.

At some point, Sunny realized that the climbing monstrosities were now mere meters away from him. He could see every disturbing detail of their rotting bodies, with strangely graceful flowers growing from the bloody gaps. Their crimson petals trembled as they smelled prey.

Suddenly, one of the primates strained its powerful legs and jumped into the air, instantly covering the remaining distance to Sunny's position. Before it could land, however, the Midnight Shard slashed the creature across its massive body, cutting it apart.

…What flowed out of the terrible wound, however, was not blood, but a vast cloud of red pollen.

Before Sunny could register the fact, he had already breathed in a whole lungful of it.

His eyes widened.

'Oh... oh no! This is not good!'

Chapter-235: Flower Boy

As the red pollen settled in his lungs, Sunny suddenly sensed something subtly moving inside them. Then, a wave of excruciating pain pierced his chest. With a loud scream, he fell to his knees and grabbed at the Puppeteer's Shroud. A stream of blood escaped from his mouth and splashed on the ancient stone.

In it, tiny blooms were sprouting roots, greedily drinking the crimson liquid and growing with visible speed.

Looking at them with dark resentment, Sunny gritted his teeth and slowly stood up.

By the time he straightened his back, the pain had subsided a little. The bloodthirsty flowers were already turning black and dying, destroyed by the odd blessing of the Blood Weave.

The insidious Nightmare Creature tried to devour him from inside, but really, it just signed its own death sentence. In a few short minutes, it would be destroyed completely by the furnace of his tenacious body.

And even if some part of it survived, Neph's purifying flames were going to finish the job.

…Until then, he would just have to endure this torture.

"Come... come closer, you bastards!"

As the Midnight Shard appeared in his hands, another monster was already climbing onto the shoulder of the walking colossus.

Lunging forward, Sunny brandished his sword and decapitated the foul creature, then kicked it in the chest to send it flying down. A moment later, he jumped back, narrowly avoiding being grabbed by

another primate.

Before the beast could even react, the razor-sharp tachi flashed across its body, severing both of its arms.

More red pollen burst into the air. Holding his breath, Sunny shifted his stance and attacked once again in one swift, fluid motion. The Midnight Shard pierced the knee of the massive primate, making it topple.

The creature wasn't dead, but any kind of mobility it once had was pretty much gone.

'Good enough…'

But it didn't really matter. Three other monsters were already there, ready to take the fallen creature's place. And a few seconds later, there was going to be even more of them, and then even more still — until, eventually, Sunny was torn apart by the unstoppable flood of these harrowing fiends.

He would have to think of something before that happened.

'If only I could breathe…'

Fighting through the excruciating pain that was tearing him from inside, Sunny grimaced and dashed forward to face the enemies.

In the next minute or so, he forced himself to cut out all unnecessary thoughts, turning into a ruthless hurricane of steel. The Midnight Shard danced from one Nightmare Creature to another, piercing, slashing, and severing their rotting flesh. The air was soon obscured by a vast cloud of red pollen.

At some point, Sunny gritted his teeth and disengaged from the fight, leaving a carpet of bleeding bodies in his wake. Launching himself back a few meters, he slid on the stone and left the cloud of red mist. Only then, finally, he allowed himself to draw in a deep breath.

Sensing that their enemy was gone, the primates rushed forward. However, a moment later, something glistened in the mist, and a heavy triangular blade suddenly pierced the head of the leading

creature.

The Blood Flower did not react to its host being damaged and continued its lunge. But in the next second, the head of the monstrous ape was violently jerked backward, and, losing balance, it fell down.

The string of the Prowling Thorn was coiled around the support pillars of the makeshift battlement, creating an invisible trap. By moving forward with the kunai still stuck in its skull, the unfortunate creature pulled the string taut, causing an invisible net to rise into the air. Entangled in it, half a dozen creatures tumbled to the ground, blocking the others from pursuing Sunny.

Neither the battlement nor the invisible string were going to last long, but at least it bought him a few seconds.

[You have slain an awakened monster, Blood Flower.]

[Your shadow…]

'...Finally.'

The Nightmare Creature in his lungs was finally dead. Spitting out a mouthful of blood, Sunny groaned, wiped his lips, and glanced back.

What he saw made him curse.

The group of monstrous primates climbing the back of the colossus was about to reach the collar of the stone tunic.

Sunny was about to be surrounded. And he was all out of ideas.

'...If I die today, I am at least going to drag as many of you as possible with me into a deeper, darker hell. Prepare yourselves, gangrels!'

Lunging forward, he ran on the narrow stone path and got to the middle of the giant's back just in time to collide with the first of the advancing primates and send it flying all the way down to the distant surface of the Labyrinth.

Unlike the shoulder of the colossus, Sunny had no room to maneuver

on the narrow path. In fact, he was having trouble simply keeping his balance due to the constant swaying.

But the primates, with their wide shoulders and mighty frames, were in an even worse situation than him.

On that narrow stone path, one man would be able to stop an entire army.

…Provided that nothing attacked him from behind, of course. Which was bound to happen...

Cursing, Sunny slashed and slashed, sending one monster tumbling down in a billowing cloud of red pollen after another. Despite all his efforts, he had to retreat step after step to avoid being surrounded and killed by the ferocious abominations.

The situation was becoming desperate. Especially so because the creatures that had been slowed down for a bit by the string of the Prowling Thorn finally wrestled free of it, and were seconds away from reaching his current position.

'Damnation!'

Sending a primate that was facing him staggering with a devastating blow of the Midnight Shard, Sunny desperately spun to deflect the attack from the creature approaching him from the back.

However, he was a fraction of a second too late.

Realizing that he won't be able to block or dodge the paw of the monstrous ape, Sunny feverishly tried to come up with a way to minimize the damage, at least.

…But just as the claws of the creature were about to grab onto his neck, a swift shadow suddenly fell from the skies. Catching the primate with its sharp mandibles, one of the locusts easily tore its head off and dashed back, devouring the prey with terrifying speed as it flew.

In the next moment, more Flesh Reavers fell from the skies, aiming at the climbing primates.

The two tribes of Nightmare Creatures were suddenly locked in a ferocious battle, with the six humans hopelessly stuck in-between.

Chapter-236: Ex Machina

With his back to the stone surface of the ancient statue, Sunny stared as the two tribes of Nightmare Creatures clashed in a cacophony of eerie roars and rustling noises.

Discovering a new target, swarming locusts swiftly fell from the skies and cut into the horde of the Blood Flower hosts, devouring scores of unfortunate primates in mere moments. Torn and eviscerated by the sharp mandibles, their flesh seemed to almost melt in the terrible maws of the flying abominations.

However, the massive beasts were not entirely defenseless. Any locust that lingered for a fraction of a second more than it should have was immediately grabbed and torn to pieces by the powerful primates, its black blood falling like dew on the petals of the crimson flowers that grew from their rotting bodies.

Some hosts even jumped off the colossus to grab onto diving reavers and tumble together to the distant ground.

In just a few seconds, the surface of the ancient giant and the air around him was consumed by utter chaos.

Indifferent to everything, the colossus steadily marched south.

'...Come to your senses!'

Shaking off his astonishment, Sunny swiftly finished off the primate that he had staggered a second before and pushed the heavy creature from the narrow path.

Despite the fact that their enemies were now fighting each other, the pressure on the cohort did not decrease. In fact, it only grew heavier.

Cursing under his breath, Sunny threw the Midnight Shard at another

lunging monster, turned his back to the enemies, and jumped. Grabbing onto a crack in the ancient stone, he pulled his body up and nimbly scaled the neck of the ancient statue.

For several seconds that seemed to last an eternity, Sunny was completely defenseless against the potential attacks by the monstrous locusts. However, to his luck, Nephis had chosen that exact moment to unleash her flames on the other side of the statue. A blinding flash of white drowned the skies for a second, confusing the reavers and buying him enough time to reach the stone platform.

Climbing over its edge, Sunny rolled away and sprawled on the cold stone, trying to catch his breath.

His body was in agony. The Blood Weave might have destroyed the flower growing in his lungs, but the damage was already done. Sunny had trouble breathing and felt bloody foam bubbling on his lips. Every time he inhaled, a sharp pain pierced his entire being.

'Not… not too terrible...'

Although troublesome, these wounds were not going to kill him. Sleepers healed better and faster than mundane humans, and Sunny in particular was also transformed by the drop of Weaver's ichor, making him much tougher and harder to kill than most.

...Sort of like a cockroach.

As for the pain, he had been through worse and survived. As long as Sunny had adrenaline numbing it to some degree, he was capable of giving a fight still.

Not that it would be pleasant...

With a moan, Sunny picked himself up from the ground and looked around.

Things were slowly turning from bad to worse.

Kai was long out of arrows and had to resort to using his morbid Ascended Memory. Judging by how pale his face was, he had already missed a few shots, losing a lot of blood as the result.

Cassie was still trying to maintain the powerful winds that slowed the attacking locusts down, but her face and hands were covered in blood. It seemed that even the powerful enchantment of her armor and the ardent protection of the Quiet Dancer were not enough to fully save her from harm.

Effie was now fighting the flying abominations in melee, having only a fraction of a second to react every time they attacked her. Blood was streaming down her legs, her white chiton torn and soaked with it. Her bronze helmet was gone, lying shattered on the stones.

Caster did not seem to be wounded, but his face was dark with exhaustion. Maintaining his incredible speed was taxing on both the mind and the body, so he would not be able to last much longer, either.

The Stone Saint… was the Stone Saint. The taciturn Shadow was covered in black blood from head to toe and completely indifferent to it, which only enhanced her dark and menacing visage. She continued to move with elegant grace, protecting the members of the cohort to the best of her ability. But she couldn't be everywhere all at once.

…And then there was Sunny himself, who was in the worst shape out of all of them by far.

'Curses!'

And the worst news was that now that he had to retreat back to the platform, the abominable primates were about to follow him, forcing the cohort to defend itself from two sides simultaneously.

Even worst still, unlike Sunny, the other members didn't have Blood Weave to protect them from the red pollen.

'Bad, bad, this is bad…'

Just as Sunny was thinking that thought, a bloodied hand suddenly appeared from the other side of the platform. A moment later, Nephis slid under the golden rope and shakily rose to her feet.

Changing Star had white flames dancing in her eyes. Her skin seemed

to shine with a soft glow, as though there was fire burning beneath it.

…That fire, if Sunny had to guess, was responsible for annihilating the red pollen as soon as it entered her body.

The Starlight Legion Armor was heavily damaged and seemed to be on the verge of melting, but still held, protecting the last daughter of the Immortal Flame clan to the end.

Not paying any attention to the members of the cohort, Nephis turned her head and looked south.

'What is she…'

Before Sunny could finish the thought, he was distracted by the sight of an ugly primate head rising above the edge of the circular platform. Cursing, he grabbed a jagged piece of chitin laying nearby and shoved it into the creature's eyes, forcibly pushing it back down.

At the same moment, an especially large locust suddenly fell from the sky. Batting the Quiet Dancer away, it dove right for Cassie.

Before anyone could react, its mandibles clicked.

However, instead of soft flesh, all they caught was the hard wood of the enchanted staff. The blind girl had managed to defend herself at the last moment.

The impact was still strong enough to throw her far back, nevertheless. Breaking the improvised barrier with her back, Cassie screamed… and slipped from the platform, plummeting down like a broken doll.

'No!'

The Prowling Thorn was damaged and restoring itself in the Soul Sea, and the golden rope was tied around the platform. He didn't know what to…

As the sound of a bow clattering on the stone reached his ears, Sunny saw Kai diving down from the neck of the colossus. Flying with incredible speed, he caught up with Cassie and grabbed her by the

arm.

The two of them froze in the air for a moment, absolutely defenseless against the approaching locusts.

'No, no, no!'

…But the fatal attack never came.

Suddenly, the cacophony of the battle died down, turning into deathly silence.

Sunny blinked.

Several locusts were hovering in the air mere meters away from Cassie and Kai, but they were in no hurry to devour the helpless humans. In fact, they, too, seemed frozen.

A moment later, the locusts suddenly turned around and dashed away. In fact, the whole swarm was swiftly retreating, flying away from the stone colossus with as much speed as the gluttonous abominations could muster.

It was as if… they were fleeing from something.

Many of the locusts were carrying dead primates in their claws. It seemed as though the reavers were the ultimate victors in this terrible battle against the monstrous apes.

…But Sunny was pretty sure that, soon, the whole tribe of these terrible creatures was going to have crimson blooms growing from the cracks in their chitin. Blood Flowers were truly a horrifying enemy. Who knew what they would be capable of after subjugating a whole swarm of flying abominations?

The more pressing question, however, was… what were the locusts running from?

Sunny looked down, only to realize that the giant primates were also retreating, rushing down the body of the ancient statue in something that almost resembled panic.

Then, finally, he turned and looked south, following the line of Changing Star's gaze.

His face paled.

Out there, directly in the path of the walking statue, an inconceivably vast wall of furious darkness had devoured the whole world. It was swiftly moving in their direction, bolts of lightning illuminating the raging depths of clouds almost every second.

The storm was approaching.

Chapter-237: Wall of Darkness

Kai landed on the stone platform, gently placing Cassie down. The blind girl was deathly pale and visibly hurt, but her life didn't seem to be in danger. The archer smiled reassuringly and gripped her shoulder.

Then, just like the rest of them, he turned his head and silently looked south.

A wall of impenetrable, furious darkness was approaching from there, devouring vast spans of the Labyrinth with each second. To Sunny, it felt like an endless ocean of deranged shadows was rushing to drown them. The pressure he felt was almost as bad as that of the ominous Crimson Spire.

The colossus was marching toward the darkness, completely indifferent to its menacing oppression.

The wind rustled Sunny's hair. In the stunned silence, Effie suddenly fell to her knees with a pained groan. Her hands were pressed against the breach in her archaic cuirass, bright blood streaming from beneath them.

That sound brought everyone back to reality. With a grim expression on her face, Nephis walked over to the wounded huntress and gently placed her hands on her body. A moment later, soft white radiance shone through the cracks of Effie's armor, healing her wounds and taking the pain away.

Changing Star closed her eyes and bit her lip, drops of crimson blood rolling down her ivory skin.

To take away her companion's suffering, she had to endure a much more harrowing torture.

Sunny coughed, bloody foam flying from his lips, and weakly lowered himself to the ground. He didn't feel too well.

The wall of darkness was growing closer with every moment. The wind was picking up, whistling in the cracks of the ancient statue. It brought the smell of the sea with it.

Sunny grimaced and commanded the Stone Saint to walk over and stand above him.

"What are we going to do now?"

Kai shivered, glanced at the raging wall of clouds, and said:

"Climb lower? The lightning is bound to be drawn to the neck of this giant."

Sunny shook his head.

"We can't. The sea is going to rise, so most of the statue will be submerged underwater. We will be lucky if the waves aren't high enough to reach this platform."

The archer sighed and looked down.

"So then… we're dead?"

Sunny smiled darkly.

"Don't worry. Stone doesn't conduct electricity too well, so we will be safe from lightning. Most likely. What you should really be afraid of are the things that all that commotion might attract."

After that, he bent over in another fit of painful coughing.

'Ugh… that stings a little…'

By that time, Nephis was done healing Effie. Walking over, she kneeled and looked at Sunny.

...Unexpectedly, there was an expression of sincere worry on her face.

"You… did you inhale that pollen?"

Sunny tried to grin, but ended up coughing up more blood instead.

"Yeah. A little. But don't fret, it's not… there are no flowers growing in my lungs. Anymore."

Neph's face twitched, and she outstretched her hands to place them on Sunny's chest. However, he caught them in the air with his own and stopped her.

Her skin was soft and cool to the touch.

"Don't bother. I'll be fine. Take a look at Cassie instead."

Changing Star stared at him for a few moments. Then, she suddenly asked:

"But doesn't it hurt?"

He pushed her hands away and shook his head.

"Not as bad as it's going to hurt you."

Nephis frowned.

"...I am used to it."

Sunny looked at her for a long time, his expression hard to read. Then, he said evenly:

"I know. But I don't want you to be used to it. You shouldn't be. Especially not on my account."

The weight of the things he left unsaid hung between them for a few moments. Nephis tilted her head slightly, then turned away. Finally, she sighed, lingered for a few seconds, and walked away without saying another word.

Sunny lowered his head and remained motionless for a while.

'Better… it's better this way.'

Being afraid of pain was the most human emotion there was. He couldn't help but feel that every time Nephis silently endured the

terrifying torture of her Flaw, a part of her humanity was burned away by the merciless purity of the radiant white flames. He didn't want to see it happen.

Not to mention that he was the last person in the world that Changing Star should have been helping. Because…

Suddenly, a deafening thunderclap rolled over them, forcing the members of the cohort to flinch. The light of day dimmed, and the cold wind furiously crashed into them, bearing drops of salty black water with it.

Done checking up on Cassie, Nephis glanced forward and scowled.

They were almost out of time.

"Get ready! Hold!"

With that, she summoned her sword and held it with both hands. As the incandescent light ignited the silver blade, Changing Star thrust the sword deep into the stone, melting it. Kneeling down, she gripped the sword and prepared for the onslaught of the storm.

By her side, Effie sighed and grabbed onto a crack in the stone with one hand. With the other, she drew Cassie close and hugged her.

Caster followed their leader's example and used his enchanted jian to anchor himself to the platform.

Sunny glanced at them and grimaced.

Standing above him, the Stone Saint discarded her shield and lowered one shoulder, preparing to withstand the hurricane winds. Without anything better to hold onto, Sunny hugged the thigh of his Shadow and closed his eyes, embarrassed by the indignity.

Before he could really revel in it, though, something plopped on the ground near him. Opening one eye, Sunny was surprised to see Kai.

"...What? What are you doing here?"

The archer smiled with embarrassment and coughed.

"Uh... well, you see. I don't have a sword that can cut stone or herculean strength. So, ah… mind if I hold onto the other thigh of your beautiful stone companion?"

Sunny glared at him for a couple of seconds and then scoffed.

"Fine! Whatever. Just don't grab onto me by mistake…"

As the endless wall of darkness approached, the headless colossus steadily walked forward and then dove straight into the furious embrace of the harrowing storm.

Chapter-238: Into the Storm

A stray drop of rain fell on Sunny's cheek. The howling of the wind grew louder. A moment later, the whole world suddenly darkened, and he was assaulted by a furious gale. The water pelted him in the face, drowning the curse Sunny was about to yell.

'D—damn!'

The storm descended on them with terrifying violence. The corpses of repulsive locusts that were left on the platform suddenly moved. Then, picked up by the wind, they were thrown off the neck of the steadily walking colossus, disappearing into the darkness. Their black blood was washed away by the torrent of rain.

A blinding flash of lightning pierced the veil of clouds, followed by a deafening thunderclap.

As the stone became slippery and wet, Sunny felt his body being forcefully pushed away from its surface by the gale. Gripping the Stone Saint tighter, he gasped and grimaced. Pain pierced his damaged lungs.

'Worst… worst amusement ride ever…'

Fortunately, the heavy Shadow was not moved by the tremendous pressure of the hurricane. Firmly planting herself on the surface of the platform, she turned her torso and lowered a shoulder, cutting the wind with her solid stone body.

To her side, Nephis, Caster, and Effie were desperately holding on against the assault of the hurricane. With some effort, they were also able to resist it.

But the worst was still to come.

Hidden from the sun, the dark sea was rising from the depths. Sunny could hear the deep rumbling of the black water rushing through the twisting passages of the Labyrinth and washing over the mounds of crimson coral. Soon, the stone giant was walking through it, creating a furious whirlpool with each step of his gargantuan feet.

Another bolt of lightning tore the skies apart, illuminating the world made of nothing but wind, water, and darkness. Hit by an especially violent gust of wind, the Stone Saint slid a few centimeters back and sent Sunny's heart into a momentary panic.

The stone giant walked forward.

After a while, the black water covered his knees, then his abdomen, then his chest. Following a long and torturous span of time spent holding onto the Shadow and enduring the onslaught of the storm, Sunny saw the raging waves flowing over the broken battlements on the shoulder of the ancient statue.

His face became grim.

During the previous night, the dark sea had not risen high enough to reach the stone platform they were sheltering on. However, with how high the waves were, things were bound to change.

As though answering his thoughts, a massive wave crashed into the neck of the colossus, washing over the platform. The members of the cohort were hit by a wall of blackness and instantly drenched from head to toe in salty seawater.

Luckily, no one was washed away… for now.

The howling wind, the furious onslaught of rain, the constant flashes of lightning and the violent cacophony of thunderclaps were already enough to instill in them the feeling that the whole world was about to split apart and crumble. With the dark waves rising to strike at the stone platform over and over again, the situation became truly disastrous.

And yet, they held on. Minute after minute, against all odds, the six humans clung to the ancient stone, refusing to be taken away by the

raging tempest. Sunny didn't know how much time had passed or how far the stone giant had walked into the depths of the storm, but there was no sign of it growing weaker.

In fact, it was only becoming more ferocious and terrible.

However, this wasn't even what he was really afraid of. His true fear hid not in the skies that had gone mad, but in the lightless depths of the cursed sea.

And soon, inevitably, his worst fears came true.

With a harrowing sense of premonition, Sunny suddenly lowered his head and gazed down, as though trying to see through the mass of ancient stone. Deep beneath them, he felt a gargantuan shadow rising from the depths.

…One of the unspeakable terrors of the dark sea was crawling from whatever abyss that had spawned it to face the marching colossus.

'Curse it all…'

Looking up, Sunny saw Kai desperately clinging to the Stone Saint beside him. For once, the archer did not seem dazzling. He was just wet, pale, and scared out of his wits.

Behind him, Nephis was kneeling on the stones, gripping the hilt of her silver sword, her fingers white and bloodless.

Straining his hurting lungs, Sunny yelled:

"Be! Ready! The dwe…"

However, before he could finish, her eyes suddenly grew wide.

Swiftly turning around, Sunny saw a gargantuan tentacle slowly rising from the seething waves. Illuminated by a flash of lightning, it looked like a tall, grotesque black tower. It pierced the skies and froze for a moment, looming over the ancient colossus.

…Feeling his heart skip a bit, Sunny realized that he knew the sight of it. This was the same gigantic black tentacle he saw on his first

night on the Forgotten Shore, the one that had effortlessly pulled the enormous monstrous shark under the waves and tore it in half like a little fish.

The abomination that even Corrupted Nightmare Creatures were afraid of.

…Falling from above, the gargantuan tentacle crashed on the moving statue and coiled itself around its neck.

'Oh no!'

***

Before Sunny could react, the gigantic tentacle was already wrapped around the neck of the colossus. Its bulbous flesh suddenly contracted, as though trying to strangle the stone giant.

…And pull him beneath the waves.

Without ever slowing down, the ancient statue continued to walk forward. Then, in a roar of falling water, its colossal hand rose from the depths of the cursed sea and grabbed onto the tentacle.

Grasping it in his stone fist, the colossus lingered for a moment… and easily tore the tentacle apart.

Sunny's eyes widened.

One part of the gigantic black tentacle convulsed and slid off the neck of the ancient colossus, falling into the raging waves. The other part stubbornly tried to coil around his arm, but was pushed away by the stone palm and disappeared back into the depths of the cursed sea.

For a few moments, the black water was silent.

'Oh... gods!'

…And then, the whole surface of it suddenly exploded into the skies.

Chapter-239: Clash of Titans

The surface of the cursed sea seethed and boiled, then exploded into the skies. Following the disappearance of the gargantuan tentacle, six others appeared from beneath the black waves. They rose and loomed above the marching colossus like twisted mountains, blocking the clamor of the storm for a fleeting moment.

Sunny gritted his teeth and stared at the terrible image, trying to comprehend the scale of the approaching battle.

How were tiny humans supposed to survive the fight between titans?

A second later, the tentacles collapsed from the skies to assail the stone giant. Because of their size, it seemed as if they were moving in slow motion. However, Sunny knew that it was just an illusion.

Four of the arms of the unseen leviathan submerged back under the water to coil around the legs and the torso of the colossus, while two remaining ones slithered toward his hand.

The ancient statue continued to walk south, seemingly unperturbed by the furious assault of the terrifying dweller of the depths. It batted one of the tentacles away, and allowed the other to wrap around its wrist.

"Hold fast!"

Sunny didn't register whose shout that was, but followed the advice and grabbed onto the Stone Saint even tighter.

'Curse it all!'

In the furious roar of thunder and blinding lightning, the stone giant suddenly staggered and slightly careened to the side. The tentacle that was coiled around his wrist had tensed, trying to pull the hand

down.

The power hiding in its black, oily, bulbous flesh was so harrowing that several cracks appeared on the surface of the ancient stone. It almost looked as though the wrist of the colossus was going to snap and explode into a torrent of shards.

Instead, the giant turned his palm and grasped the tentacle, then squeezed it in an obliterating grip.

The tentacle was trying to crush the ancient stone while being crushed in the fist of the stone giant in return. For a few moments, it wasn't clear which creature was more devastatingly powerful. But then the fingers of the colossus slowly submerged into the black flesh, sending rivers of dark, fetid blood spilling down into the sea.

Soon, the tentacle was torn to shreds and had to retreat.

However, the other five were already attacking the colossus from below. Sunny couldn't see through the black waters of the cursed sea, but he could vividly imagine two of them coiling around the legs of the ancient statue, two wrapping around its torso, and another one holding down the hand and the mason's hammer.

Whatever the gigantic tentacles were doing seemed to have worked. The pace of the walking statue slowed, as if it had to struggle against an unimaginable weight that was dragging it back. The colossus staggered once more, then suddenly lurched forward, and finally stopped.

'Not good…'

Through the soles of his feet, Sunny could feel the vibrations running through the ancient stone. The giant was trembling, as if straining to move his colossal body with all his strength. The circular platform they were hiding on slowly began to slope to the side, allowing even more waves to wash over it.

The furious storm grew even stronger, as though celebrating the battle between two enormous creatures. The hurricane wind crushed into the cohort, pelting them with rain and seawater. The

thunderclaps merged into one continuous, deafening roar, and the flashes of lightning were surrounding them like a net woven from celestial flame.

Suddenly, the ancient statue shuddered and changed its angle. It was almost as if… as if the colossus was bending his waist and leaning forward.

Sunny's eyes widened. He instinctively understood what was about to happen.

…He wasn't the only one.

As the Stone Saint followed his command and fell to her knees to thrust a hand into a crack in the stone, Nephis screamed:

"We're going under! Hold your breaths!"

'Here we go again!'

In the next second, the colossus leaned forward and dove under the turbulent surface of the waves.

Sunny barely had time to inhale deeply. Then, the cohort was once again in the cold embrace of the cursed sea. Only, unlike the previous day when they had to cross the canyon, this time they were being pulled deep into the void of darkness instead of across it.

Feeling a powerful current rush past him, Sunny held on for his dear life and waited. If he was right about what the colossus was doing, they still had a chance to survive.

As the pressure of the black water grew heavier and the cold of the lightless void seeped into his bones, the circular platform suddenly stopped and swayed lightly. Despite being submerged deep underwater, Sunny could hear a loud, indescribable sound spreading through the vast expanse of the cursed sea.

'Gods, gods!'

Even though he knew that the gods were dead, he couldn't help but call out to them.

But all that answered him was silence.

…Then, finally, the body of the colossus swayed once more, and suddenly began to move up.

With the same speed that they were pulled into the depths, the cohort was now being lifted from the darkness of the cursed sea back into the furious embrace of the storm.

Sunny was barely conscious by the time the shoulders of the colossus broke the surface of the water and the circular platform appeared above the waves. Glancing around, he counted the members of the cohort and made sure that no one was washed away during this harrowing dive.

Then, he steeled himself and turned his head to peer forward.

The ancient giant had not been pulled into the black water by the unseen horror of the depths. Instead, once the gigantic tentacles had proven to be a nuisance, he had simply leaned forward… and scooped the abyssal creature from the bottom of the sea.

And now the colossus was holding it in his hand, rising the leviathan into the raging skies.

Even knowing that gazing upon the true appearance of the horror of the depths was not the safest of ideas, Sunny couldn't help but look.

What he saw made him shiver.

Chapter-240: Gaze of the Unknown

Held in the ancient statue's hand was a gargantuan skull that looked almost like that of a human, but simultaneously vastly different.

Apart from the size, the shape of it was all wrong. If Sunny had to describe what exactly was different about it, he would have trouble putting it into words, but everything about the skull screamed of wrongness, malignity, and evil.

The vile aura it radiated was almost palpable to the touch. Sunny suddenly felt nauseous and weak, as if just looking at the gargantuan skull was seeping the life out of him.

This sensation was somewhat similar to what he had experienced when trying to read the runes describing the Unknown, only magnified by a thousand times.

…The most prominent and obvious difference, though, was that the gargantuan skull had three eye sockets instead of two, the third one situated above the other ones, right in the middle of its forehead. Its canines were also more prominent and heavy than that of a human.

The lower jaw of the skull was missing, and it was from there that the seven gigantic tentacles protruded. Surprisingly, looking at the tentacles themselves did not have the same sickening effect on Sunny.

With a sense of dark astonishment, he realized that the horror of the depths was using the terrible skull as a shell, hiding inside of it like a weak and vulnerable sea creature would… only, of course, nothing weak or vulnerable would have ever survived the corruption of these ancient bones.

In fact, he could see the black oily flesh bulging from the dark

chasms of the skull's three cavernous eye sockets.

In a flash of lightning, Sunny noticed that the tentacles were moving, coiling themselves around the arm of the stone colossus. Three of them were heavily damaged, but the remaining four were still full of unimaginable power.

Their combined strength was more than enough to shatter the ancient stone.

Despite the fact that his arm was already starting to crack, the colossus seemed indifferent to the devastating embrace of the abyssal creature.

'What… what is he doing?!'

As if answering his question, the dark sea suddenly surged and split apart, releasing the stone giant's other arm from its cold depths. With rivers of black water streaming from it, the hand of the colossus slowly rose, reaching all the way into the raging skies.

The hurricane winds broke against it, powerless to move the arm of the colossus even by a centimeter.

The hammer gripped in his hand was suddenly enveloped in a ghostly blue glow.

…No, it wasn't really a glow. There were arcs of electricity running all over its surface. They were the harbingers of…

Sunny's eyes widened.

In the next moment, a bolt of lightning connected the hammer to the skies. And then another, and another. Dozens of lightnings landed on the stone hammer in short succession, the roar of thunder almost shattering the whole world.

Enveloped in the raging shroud of electricity, the ancient stone heated and turned incandescently bright, emanating a furious orange glow.

For a moment, everything was still.

And then, with the same calm indifference, the colossus brought his burning hammer down and delivered a devastating blow to the abhorrent skull. The beak of the hammer easily shattered the ancient bone and sank deep into the flesh of the horror hiding within.

Sunny stared, paralyzed by awe.

But in the next moment, he was thrown back by a terrible, ear-piercing, cacophonous wail. That wail was like nothing that a living being should ever have been able to produce, and much louder than even the deafening thunder tearing the raging skies. It came from the dweller of the depth, whose body was deeply wounded by the stone colossus.

Peering at it, Sunny saw a vast wave of dark blood gush from the terrible wound delivered to the abyssal creature. No… not blood. It was something different.

What flowed from the body of the horror of the depths was nothing but pure darkness.

…And the wall of it was heading right for them.

Suddenly, Sunny was overwhelmed by a sense of mortal danger.

'W—what…'

To the rest of the cohort, the darkness spilling from the terror's body must have looked no different from the tenebrous mass of storm clouds that surrounded them, the black surface of the sea, or even the fetid blood of the giant locusts that they had slain earlier.

But Sunny, who could see through any shadow, knew instantly that it was not the same. Because his gaze could not penetrate the lightless, undulating surface of it at all.

Somehow, he was certain that if that darkness touched their bodies, all of them would be done for, doomed to a fate a hundred times worse than death.

The kind of fate he couldn't even conceive of, let alone imagine.

Twisting his body, Sunny opened his mouth and screamed as loud as he could:

"Neph! Light!"

There was no more than a second left before the wave of darkness washed over them. If Changing Star was late even by a moment or wasted time thinking over his words and deciding whether she should listen to him…

But she didn't.

As soon as Nephis heard the unreserved panic in Sunny's voice, she instantly summoned her flames and channeled them into her sword.

A blinding white radiance suddenly enveloped the cohort, pushing the blackness of the storm away. When the wave of true darkness that flowed from the abyssal creature's wound touched the pure light, it simply… ceased to exist, disappearing like a vestige of nightmare in the brightness of the day.

Sunny exhaled and fell to the stones, drained of all strength.

Glancing forward, he saw the ancient colossus remove his hammer and indifferently drop the harrowing giant skull back into the surging waters of the cursed sea. The black tentacles weakly convulsed and unwrapped themselves from his arm, disappearing into the waves a few moments later.

…Without paying them any attention, the ancient statue lowered the hammer and continued its march south.

It was as if nothing had happened.

Sunny gritted his teeth and gathered whatever endurance he had left to grab onto the Stone Saint once again.

The storm was still not over.

However, somehow, it didn't seem as frightening and dangerous anymore.

Indeed, nothing else happened to them. Hours later, the raging winds grew weaker, and the torrent of rain slowly turned into a light drizzle.

The veil of tenebrous clouds was slowly torn apart, and the rays of sunshine shone through the tears.

The storm was over.

Lying on the cold stone surface, Sunny stared at the sky and grimaced.

'Comparatively safe my ass...'

Chapter-241: Halfway

As it turned out, the cohort had endured the fury of the heavens for almost an entire day. Before the storm had appeared, the night had still been far away, and now, it was already a new morning.

The colossus was steadily marching south, completely unshaken by his terrifying battle with the abyssal leviathan. Sunny was growing more and more certain that the ancient statue, while brought to a semblance of life by some unknown power, was not truly sentient.

The headless giant was more like an Echo than a living thing, but then even Echoes seemed to possess some remnants of a personality — at least his poor Scavenger had one. Quiet Dancer often behaved like a prudish and cantankerous young woman, too… no matter how strange it was to describe a flying rapier in that way.

Not to mention Shadows, who were much more alive than Sunny felt comfortable admitting.

Compared to all of them, the colossus seemed rather… lifeless.

Just what kind of a being was he?

Sprawled on the ground, Sunny glanced sideways and observed the Stone Saint, who was standing indifferently at the edge of the platform. He wondered what this living statue thought of her strange colossal sibling. Was she in awe of him or didn't care one way or another?

It was hard to tell. But then again, he was not in the mood to think too much right now.

Sunny was truly exhausted and hurting all over. Everyone was, really.

Despite the incredible achievement of surviving the onslaught of two entire tribes of Nightmare Creatures, the storm, and an encounter with an actual horror of the depths — or rather, because of it — the members of the cohort looked truly pathetic.

Each of them was either laying on the stone surface of the swaying platform or sitting with a lost look on their face. They were all wounded, tired, and wet.

Even Kai had lost his usual luster, and that alone screamed of how rough this recent hardship had been on them. Even when compared to the usual ruthless reality of the Forgotten Shore.

…Well, no matter. They had survived. More than that, if Sunny wasn't wrong, the stone giant had already brought them more than a thousand kilometers to the south. And by the evening, that number was going to double.

A quick way to travel across the Labyrinth, indeed. In two days, they were going to traverse ten times more ground than Sunny, Nephis and Cassie had managed in two months of their bloody journey to the Dark City. And they had only achieved that much thanks to the desperate decision to travel by boat.

Not bad, even if they had to endure a few hours of pure torture and a couple of near-death moments.

…Plus, the speed wasn't the only benefit that riding atop the ancient colossus had brought them.

With a subtly satisfied expression, Sunny listened to his body and smiled. Even without summoning the runes, he knew that he was once again at the same level as he had been before creating the Shadow Saint, and even above it.

But there was no harm in looking, right?

As the shimmering runes appeared in the air in front of him, Sunny found the familiar cluster… and blinked.

Shadow Fragments: [494/1000].

'This is… this is… what?'

Although he knew that the battle against giant locusts and ghastly flowers brought him a bountiful harvest of fragments, he was still astonished to see just how many he had gained. In the short span of time after Cassie had warned them about the coming storm and before the wall of darkness appeared on the horizon, Sunny managed to reap more than one hundred of them.

One hundred and thirty-two, to be exact.

'Incredible!'

Most came from the Blood Flowers. In a direct confrontation, Sunny would have never been able to kill that many, but yesterday, all he had to do was cause their hosts to plummet to the ground and let gravity do the rest. Between those sent to their deaths by the Prowling Thorn and those he had cut down with the Midnight Shard, about two dozen abominations had died by his hand.

…And another one by his blood, but Sunny didn't want to even think about that experience, ever again.

Each of the ghastly flowers was an awakened monster, bringing him four fragments per kill. With the addition of a dozen or so locusts slain by the Stone Saint, Sunny ended up with this mind-boggling windfall.

Not only did he return to his peak form, but he was now stronger by just shy of a hundred shadow fragments.

'All in a day's work…'

Still stunned, Sunny couldn't help but shake his head. If this continued, he was going to come close to fully saturating his Shadow Core by the end of this expedition.

…Which was one of the reasons he had joined it in the first place, but before today, his ambitious plans had been just a conjecture.

Now, they were becoming reality.

By accumulating a thousand fragments and saturating his core, Sunny was also going to learn yet another secret of his divine Aspect. What exactly was going to happen once the runes showed "Shadow Fragments: [1000/1000]"?

He was now almost halfway to finding out.

But even that wasn't all.

Looking at another cluster of runes, Sunny read:

Memories: [Silver Bell], [Puppeteer's Shroud], [Midnight Shard], [Ordinary Rock], [Prowling Thorn], [Endless Spring]...

And right after that, two new sets glimmered in the air:

...[Blood Blossom], [Dark Wing.]

'Two new Memories. Jackpot!'

The only thing that slightly ruined his exhilaration was the fact that, recently, Sunny was having trouble finding Memories that were actually useful to him. Of course, the Stone Saint had a ferocious appetite and could consume anything that he wasn't going to incorporate into his arsenal.

But simply feeding his spoils to the Shadow, while rewarding in its own way, was not as pleasant as acquiring a new powerful tool.

With a sense of cautious anticipation, Sunny concentrated on the new Memories.

'Well… let's take a look. Maybe it's something useful after all.'

Chapter-242: New Toys

Sunny decided to take a look at the Dark Wing first.

'Let's see what my Shadow brought me.'

He looked at the glimmering runes.

Memory: [Dark Wing].

Memory Rank: Awakened.

Memory Tier: I.

Memory Type: Garment.

Memory Description: [This cloak is as light as a dragonfly's wing… and as durable.]

Sunny stared at the description, his eyes twitching.

'Cloak? Another damn cloak?! And what does the Spell mean, as durable as a bug's wing? Those aren't durable at all!'

Taking a deep breath, he calmed himself down and read at the runes again.

'Well… maybe it has an incredible enchantment.'

Memory Enchantments: [Glide].

Enchantment Description: [Allows one to levitate slightly above the ground and slowly move in any direction, or glide down softly from any height.]

Sunny frowned slightly, thinking about whether that Memory could be useful. Then, he dove into the Soul Sea and summoned the sphere

of light containing the Dark Wing to take a look at its spellweave.

The descriptions provided by the Spell were not always very informative. It was better to study the thing himself.

At first glance, the ability to fly was nothing short of incredible. Amazing, even! Sunny had heard that there were Memories that gave their owners literal wings, but never expected to encounter one before becoming an Awakened, or even a Master. However, their usefulness differed from case to case.

There were questions of height, speed, and control. No Memory could have given someone the ability to fly as fast and as unrestrained as Kai could. But some came close…

However, as far as these Memories went, Dark Wing turned out to be of the lowest standard. It seemed that it only allowed a person to levitate or hover a couple of meters above ground and move with a very, very modest speed.

Sunny could achieve pretty much everything that such an ability provided with the help of the Prowling Thorn and its invisible string — and do it better, too. Of course, he couldn't fight while using the kunai to swing around on the string. In that regard, this new Memory was better.

However, after imagining himself fighting while using the Dark Wing to hover above ground or even worse glide in the sky, Sunny shuddered.

The beautiful transparent cloak indeed looked like a pair of dragonfly's wings. It was extremely thin and brittle. The slightest strike would rip it apart, causing the wielder to plummet down. So, unless Sunny wanted to die, using this Memory in a battle was out of the question.

In short, it had little utility value compared to the Prowling Thorn and couldn't be used for aerial fights.

Sunny glanced at the Stone Saint.

'Should I feed it to her?'

But after thinking about it for a couple more seconds, he shook his head.

No, despite all its flaws, the Dark Wing was still a real boon. The ability to glide alone was priceless. With it, he did not need to be afraid of falling down from deadly heights.

Like from the height of an ancient walking colossus, for example.

'...I'm keeping it.'

The thing would only give his Shadow one fragment, anyway.

Looking up, Sunny noticed a transparent cloak that looked like a pair of dragonfly wings suddenly appear on Cassie's shoulders. The sunlight refracted through it, making the wings glimmer slightly with all the colors of the rainbow.

With an expression of wonder on her face, the blind girl made the wings move. A moment later, they disappeared into a blur, and Cassie suddenly hovered a few centimeters above the ground. She giggled.

…So, the Quiet Dancer had earned her the same Memory his Shadow had earned him. This was good. While the weak levitation ability was mostly useless to Sunny, to the blind girl, it would be of tremendous help. The terrain of the Forgotten Shore was often uneven and treacherous, so being able to float above it was a true gift for someone who could not see.

Sunny smiled softly and looked away.

'It's nice that she still knows how to laugh.'

A moment later, his expression darkened. Closing his eyes, Sunny sighed heavily and turned his attention to the second Memory he had gotten.

'Don't think about it.'

Memory: [Blood Blossom.]

Memory Rank: Awakened.

Memory Tier: II.

Memory Type: Charm.

Sunny's heart skipped a bit. Charms were a rare type of Memory that took the form of a small accessory — most often an amulet or a talisman. Unlike weapons, armor and tools, they obviously had no practical value. However, charms made up for it by possessing unique and powerful enchantments.

Among the elite Awakened, these were the Memories everyone hunted for the most.

…And now he got one!

'Please be good, please be good…'

Memory Description: [No matter how much blood was spilled, her hunger only grew.]

Sunny blinked.

'...Creepy.'

Memory Enchantments: [Flower of Evil.]

Enchantment Description: [This beautiful charm imbues all Memories and Echoes of its wielder…]

As Sunny read the description, the runes suddenly changed right before his eyes. After a moment, a new one appeared between them:

[This beautiful charm imbues all Memories, Echoes, and Shadows of its wielder with an unquenching thirst for blood. They receive an overall enhancement when used against a bleeding foe, and grow more powerful the more their prey bleeds.]

Not even paying attention to the way the Spell changed the runes on the fly, Sunny froze.

'Aura… it's an aura enchantment.'

Aura enchantments were an extremely rare thing. Unlike the usual enchantments, they affected not only the wielder, but everything that fit their target criteria in a certain radius.

…No need to mention how precious such things were. And Sunny didn't just get an aura charm, but also one that provided a comprehensive augmentation to the power of all — all! — his Memories, Echoes and Shadows, as long as his enemy bled.

And the more they bled, the stronger that augmentation would grow.

"Beautiful…"

Sunny was so stunned that he accidentally whispered that word out loud.

A moment later, he suddenly shuddered and quickly glanced around to make sure that Effie wasn't anywhere near him when he had said it.

To his relief, the huntress was on the opposite side of the platform, working on the map of the Forgotten Shore.

Sunny exhaled and furtively wiped the sweat off his forehead.

'Phew. That was close!"

Then, a wide grin slowly appeared on his face. With a satisfied sigh, he rested his head on the stone and thought:

'Sorry, Saint. Today, you shall remain hungry…'

Chapter-243: Fangs of a Dragon

By the middle of their second day of traveling through the Labyrinth atop the ancient colossus, an ominous dark line appeared on the horizon. With every minute, it slowly grew closer. Pretty soon, Sunny was able to tell that they were headed toward a vast mountain chain.

The mountains seemed to serve as a border between the Forgotten Shore and the rest of the Dream Realm. They were tall and jagged, piercing the skies like the fangs of a giant dragon. Their distant peaks were covered in pristine white snow and wrapped in a veil of mist that streamed into the ravines and onto the ridges below.

This was the place where the first lord of the Castle had disappeared all those years ago, as well as the goal of their own perilous journey.

As the stone giant came closer to the mountains, Sunny finally understood just how tall, magnificent, and imposing they were. Even the colossus himself looked like a tiny ant in front of these towering peaks. It was hard not to feel small and insignificant in their oppressive shadow.

Slowly, the terrain of the Labyrinth began to rise. The mounds of coral grew smaller, the distance between them increased, until finally there were as much black soil and stone outcroppings visible beneath as there were islands of vivid crimson. Finally, the blades of coral became scarce.

It was as though the Labyrinth was reluctant to approach the foothills of the misty mountains... or simply unable to.

As the gargantuan statue approached the border of the crimson forest, its steps slowed. The colossus seemed to be struggling to move any further. His body was slightly bent, as if he was fighting against strong wind or some invisible force that was relentlessly pulling him back into the Labyrinth.

Even his prodigious might was not enough to defeat the pull of the ancient curse.

Finally, the stone giant staggered and stopped.

This was the moment they were waiting for.

Caster, Effie and Nephis were already climbing down, while Sunny, Cassie and Kai stood at the edge of the circular platform.

Looking down, Sunny sighed and glanced at the charming archer.

"If this doesn't work, you're going to catch me, right?"

Kai raised his elegant eyebrows, then smile at him dazzlingly.

"Why, of course. It would be my pleasure!"

Sunny's eye twitched. Shaking his head, he summoned the Dark Wing and turned away. Immediately, a cloak in the shape of two transparent wings appeared on his back.

If there was one thing calming Sunny down, it was that his shadow was already on the ground. He had sent it down in advance to scout out the landing zone and make sure that nothing was waiting for the members of the cohort below.

The Stone Saint was now standing there, looking like a tiny black dot from the height of the ancient statue's neck.

'No sense in prolonging this.'

Gritting his teeth, Sunny commanded the Dark Wing to raise him above ground… and stepped into emptiness.

For a moment, he was consumed by primal fear. But then Sunny felt that instead of plummeting down to shatter on the rocks, his body was smoothly gliding through the air.

He was still losing altitude, but at a safe and pleasant pace. Two transparent wings had turned into a blur behind his back.

Actually, this feeling was… exhilarating.

Trying to keep a wide smile from appearing on his face, Sunny reminded himself how brittle his wings were and tried to control the direction of his descent.

All it took was a slight shift of his posture and a mental command to the Dark Wing. Soon, Sunny was gliding down in a wide spiral, enjoying the feeling of wind whistling in his ears.

'It's a shame that others can't experience this.'

Initially, he was planning to take Effie on the ride of her life. With Kai and Cassie carrying the other two members of the cohort, reaching the ground would have been really easy. However, after a little bit of experimentation, they had found out that Memories left behind by the terrible locusts couldn't carry too much weight.

Even supporting Sunny himself was already close to the Dark Wing's limit.

So he got to enjoy this pleasant feeling of weightlessness all by himself.

After a few minutes of smooth gliding, Sunny softly landed near the Stone Saint and looked up. Kai and Cassie were right behind him, and slightly above, already reaching the knees of the colossus, were the other three members of the cohort.

'...This Memory might be better than I gave it credit for. Still not usable in a battle, but very handy nevertheless.'

Soon, they were all reunited in the shadow of the ancient statue.

A few moments later, the colossus trembled. Slowly, it turned around and took a giant step. The ground trembled as his feet landed on it.

The six humans stood silently, watching the ancient statue walk away. It was heading east, moving parallel to the impregnable wall of the draconian mountains. Sunny suspected that the stone giant had walked all around the Forgotten Shore thousands of times, and now was at the start — or the end — of another loop.

The Stone Saint was watching the headless giant walk away, too. Sunny glanced at her, wondering once again if his Shadow felt something toward this enormous creature.

He got a strange sensation that she did.

However, it wasn't awe as Sunny had suspected. If anything, the hint of emotion hiding deep in the ruby eyes of the Stone Saint was that of… disdain.

'...Curious.'

Back at the ruined cathedral, Sunny had noticed that the Black Knight's armor bore a visible resemblance to that of his taciturn Shadow. However, it didn't seem as though both came from the same source. It was more like the armor of the Fallen Devil was derived from that of the living statues.

Almost as if someone had tried to replicate their armaments, but only managed to create a lesser facsimile.

Was the stone giant the same? A failed attempt at repeating the same miraculous act of creation that had put a spark of true life into the Stone Saint and her brethren?

There was no way to know. But still, Sunny couldn't help but wonder…

Soon, the ground stopped trembling and the figure of the mechanically marching colossus disappeared into the grey fog. A few moments later, Nephis sighed and turned around to face the mountains.

It was time to find a place to spend the night.

Tomorrow morning, they were going to start their search for the lost expedition.

Chapter-244: Death Zone

This high into the foothills of the mountains, they didn't have to look long for a suitable shelter. In fact, they could have simply camped in the open.

The dark sea couldn't get to them anymore.

As the night descended and enveloped the world in the familiar veil of absolute darkness, Sunny volunteered to be the first one to stand watch. Gazing down the sloping surface of the rocky ground, he watched as the black water slowly rose from the distant crimson forest of the Labyrinth.

It crawled up the steep slope of the foothills, straining to devour as much of them as it could, but then stopped hundreds of meters away from the place where the cohort had made their camp and swayed gently, unable to move any further.

Just like the headless colossus had not been able to.

Looking at the powerless waves, Sunny finally allowed himself to believe that they were now outside of the Forgotten Shore.

Or, more precisely, at the very edge of it. In any case, the cursed sea was no longer a threat to them.

'How strange.'

Sunny had grown accustomed to living in the constant fear of this transient abyss. Even in the Dark City, he was constantly aware of its oppressive presence. No one was free of the frightening thoughts about what would happen if the seemingly unassailable wall of the city finally gave in and fell, opening the way to the flood of darkness.

But now, they were safe from it.

…For now.

With a sigh, Sunny summoned the Blood Blossom. An intricate pendant in the shape of a beautiful red flower soon appeared, hanging on a black thread around his neck. He admired it for a few short moments, and then hid the charm under his armor.

It was better to be safe than sorry. Relaxing now was not the brightest of ideas.

Yes, the dangers of the dark sea were now behind them. But he was ready to bet that actually escaping the clutches of the Forgotten Shore was not going to be that easy.

And who said that the place beyond this desolate hell was any better? With his luck, it was only going to be worse.

Consumed in thought, Sunny stared at the dark sea and waited.

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In the morning, the members of the cohort prepared to start the search. But before they could get to it, Nephis suddenly stopped them and peered at the towering peaks that loomed above in a veil of mist.

There was a dark expression on her face.

After a while, Changing Star suddenly kneeled and picked up a large rock. Straining her muscles, she crushed it in her fist and then looked at the shards with an inquisitive look.

Finally, she threw the shattered pieces away and sighed.

A few seconds later, Nephis spoke in a heavy tone:

"...I know where we are."

What was that supposed to mean?

Echoing his thought, Effie scoffed.

"We all know where we are, princess. The southern edge of the

Forgotten Shore, about two thousand kilometers away from the Dark City. No?"

Nephis shook her head and stood up.

"I mean I know where we are in the Dream Realm."

Everyone froze.

"What… what did you just say?"

The members of the cohort stared at her with their eyes opened wide. The words Changing Star had said hit them like a bolt of lightning.

She pointed at the draconian peaks and said, her voice even:

"We are north of the Hollow Mountains. I am sure of it."

'Hollow… mountains?'

The name rang a bell, but Sunny couldn't quite put his finger on where exactly he had heard it. Glancing at the other members of the cohort, he noticed that everyone shared the same expression — except for Caster, who seemed to know something. His face grew pale.

Nephis lingered for a few moments, and then explained:

"Human sphere of influence in the Dream Realm is not very large, but it has been slowly expanding for the last thirty years. There are three great Citadels, the most prosperous of which, Bastion, is ruled by the noble scions of the Valor clan. And numerous lesser ones."

Then, she grimaced.

"For a time, the allies and vassals of Clan Valor used to conquer one lesser Citadel after another, expanding human territory far into the north. But then their expansion in that direction stalled. Because they encountered Hollow Mountains."

'Oh… right. I think I heard that from teacher Julius. The northern border of the human territory is a wild place.'

Sunny frowned.

"Are these… Hollow Mountains very dangerous?"

Changing Star gritted her teeth.

"As dangerous as it gets. Actually, beyond that. The mountain chain stretches for thousands of kilometers, forming a whole region of its own. It is marked as a death zone. Even Saints don't come back from there alive."

Sunny shivered. Death zones were regions of the Dream Realm populated by Nightmare Creatures of the three highest ranks — Great, Cursed, and Unholy.

Since no human had survived the Fourth Nightmare yet, facing even the weakest of them was a death sentence to anyone below the Saint rank, and even Saints had only a slight chance of prevailing against a Great creature… let alone a Cursed one.

Somehow, Sunny managed to become one of the few people alive to slay a Great Devil. But he had only survived that encounter by pure luck — if not for his weird trait of possessing a Shadow Core instead of a Soul Core, the unborn spawn of the Vile Thieving Bird would have stolen his life force and killed him on the spot.

…And if Nephis was right, the Hollow Mountains were populated by many creatures of that caliber and higher.

Sunny sighed.

"So what you're telling us is that this place is even worse than the Forgotten Shore?"

Without having to say anything, Nephis simply nodded.

He smiled.

"Figures."

He had been right after all. Escaping the Forgotten Shore was simply impossible.

The only way out lay in the cursed Crimson Spire, and that…

That was where they were headed, whether he wanted to or not.

With a dark expression on his face, Sunny stared at the jagged peaks of the Hollow Mountains and said:

"So… we are going there?"

Nephis lingered for a few moments, and then answered calmly:

"Let's hope not. We only need to get as far as the First Lord had gotten. That… that should be close to where we are right now."

Sunny looked at her and nodded.

"In that case, let's not waste any time. The sooner we return into the Labyrinth, the better."

'Gee. I never thought I would be impatient to return to that damned hellhole. You just never know what the future holds, huh?'

Chapter-245: Theatre of Giants

Armed with the understanding of just how dangerous the beautiful mountains towering above them were, the cohort set out deeper into the foothills. Because they didn't know much about the area and what type of creatures populated it, they decided to stay together.

While it would have been much easier to send Kai to take a look around from above, no one wanted to take this risk. As the result, the six humans moved in a tight group, much like they had on the narrow streets of the Dark City and in the Labyrinth.

…However, the landscape around them was vastly different. There were no growths of crimson coral covering the ground, just grass and outcroppings of grey rock. It almost felt like they were back on Earth.

Strangely, that made Sunny feel uncomfortable. Looking around, he could see far in every direction, with no walls of coral or ancient, ruined buildings obscuring his view. That made it harder for the Nightmare Creatures to ambush the cohort, but also impossible for the cohort to hide from anything that could have been watching.

'That is true, but… where are all the monsters?'

Indeed, no matter how hard Sunny looked, he couldn't see any movement whatsoever. It was as if the entire area was completely dead. They were surrounded by complete silence, which was broken only when a member of the cohort made a sound.

The picturesque scenery could have been peaceful, but felt eerie instead. Even Sunny's shadow seemed uncharacteristically listless.

Full of unease, they continued to move forward.

The plan was very simple. Because of Cassie's vision, they knew that the First Lord and his companions had traveled to the mountains the

same way that they did, or at least followed the same route. That meant that both cohorts entered the foothills at approximately the same spot.

The other thing Cassie had told them was that they were searching for a vast pit in the stone. It was hard to miss something like that, so all they had to do was to move deeper into the foothills and look around.

The ground beneath their feet gently sloped upward. As time passed, it grew more and more rocky, and the incline became rather steep. Soon, they were surrounded by tall boulders and had to walk on bare stone.

At some point, Sunny looked back and was surprised to realize how high above the labyrinth they had climbed. By now, it was far away and below them, looking like a vast crimson sea.

A strange sensation settled in his heart. With a bit of introspection, Sunny realized that it was something he had lost a long time ago.

The feeling of being connected to the rest of humanity.

Even though all of them understood that crossing the Hollow Mountains was an impossible task, simply knowing where they were in relation to the rest of the Awakened made all the difference.

They might have been just as stranded as they had been before… but at least they weren't lost anymore.

'What a nice, but useless thought.'

With a sigh, he turned around and hurried to catch up with the rest of the cohort.

The sun was still high in the sky when they found the pit Cassie had described. It was situated in a valley just at the point where the foothills turned into proper mountains, and turned out to be something different from what everyone had imagined.

Disturbingly, throughout the whole day, they had not met a single living thing. In any other circumstances, Sunny would have been glad

because of this strange lack of Nightmare Creatures, but now it was just making him nervous.

Standing at the edge of it, he looked down with a feeling of awe.

Cut into the flesh of the mountains, a vast quarry lay below them. Despite its incredible scale, it was clearly made by humans. A road clinging to the slope of the circular pit led to the bottom of it, wide enough for ten carriages to ride side by side.

At the far end of the quarry, the grey slope of the mountain was cut and hollowed, creating something that resembled either colossal steps or seats of an amphitheater built for giants. Here and there, massive blocks of stone stood, as though ready to be transported back to the ancient city.

Sunny studied the monolithic blocks of grey stone, then the size of the deep quarry. Something connected in his mind.

'So… so this is where the materials for the mighty wall of the Dark City had come from.'

He was certain of it. To think that the ancient inhabitants of the Forgotten Shore had transported all that stone from this far away… the thought of it was nothing short of humbling.

Effie, meanwhile, was staring at something with a tense look on her face. Suddenly. she pointed to the center of the deep quarry and said:

"Over there, look."

Following her gaze, Sunny strained his eyes. For a couple of moments, he couldn't understand what the huntress was talking about, but then his heart skipped a bit.

At the bottom of the quarry, there was a giant Nightmare Creature.

The abomination was enormous, easily twice the size of the Carapace Demon… who had already been as tall as a house. It looked like a strange insect, somewhat resembling a weird mix of a rhinoceros beetle and a praying mantis, with a smooth carapace, massive horn, and deadly blades attached to the joints of its limbs.

The whole creature seemed to be made out of stone and was the same color as the floor of the quarry. In fact, if not for Effie's warning, Sunny might have not even noticed it.

…That flesh, however, was broken and shattered, lying in piles on the ground.

The giant stone demon was dead.

And from the looks of it, it died by a human hand.

Sunny turned to Nephis and hesitated for a moment.

"What do you think? Those are sword cuts, aren't they?"

Changing Star was silent for a bit, and then said in a dark tone:

"It's hard to tell. We'll need to get closer to take a proper look."

Chapter-246: Irrefutable Proof

Ready for the worst, the cohort summoned their weapons and slowly moved down the wide road that lead to the bottom of the quarry. From reaching the foothills of the Hollow Mountains till now, they had not met a single Nightmare Creature... but that was not a reason to lower their guard.

Walking on the ancient path, all of them couldn't help but steal glances at the corpse of the giant stone demon, as though expecting it to come back to life and attack them at any moment.

If living on the Forgotten Shore had taught him anything, it was to always expect the worst.

Some time later, Effie spoke:

"See those deep fractures on the floor of the quarry? I think that this thing had burrowed from below. So watch your step."

Remembering his encounter with the Rolling Stone, Sunny looked down with a sour expression. That clumsy creature was more funny than dangerous, but only because its teeth were vastly outclassed by the Puppeteer's Shroud. If something with more bite were to ambush them from below, who knew what was going to happen?

With a simple thought, Sunny summoned the Stone Saint and ordered her to keep close. The taciturn monster stared at the tall peaks of the Hollow Mountains for a few moments, as though subtly affected by the sight of them. Then, she lowered her head and silently followed his command.

After tense and exhausting half an hour of descending into the deep pit, the cohort finally got close to the remains of the giant stone insect. Cautiously stopping a few dozen meters away from it, they hesitated, not sure how to proceed.

Finally, Nephis sighed and walked forward, approaching the shattered body of the dead demon. If that was what it had been… or was.

As their leader came close enough to the carcass to touch it with her hand, all of them held their breaths.

A few seconds went by, then a few more. Nothing jumped at Changing Star from below the stones. The giant creature had not moved, nor had it shown any signs of coming back to life. The demon just lay there, its body shattered and broken, terrifying even in death.

And it indeed was truly, really dead.

Glancing at the indifferent Saint, Sunny let out a sigh of relief.

Even though he was prepared for a tough battle, he hoped that this time, they would be able to avoid it. The members of the cohort had yet to fully recover from the harrowing journey atop the walking colossus, so they weren't in the best of shapes.

Well, at least Sunny was not, partially because he had refused Neph's offer to vanquish his wounds with her purifying flame. They were healing fast thanks to the Blood Weave and the five hundred shadow fragment… almost… that he had accumulated, but his body was yet to fully recover.

Turning her head, Nephis looked at them and said:

"Come closer."

Encouraged by her words, the members of the cohort finally put their caution to rest and walked over to the dead creature.

Of course, they were still prepared to instantly react in case something unexpected happened.

The six of them spent a few minutes studying the remains to determine whether the terrible creature was killed by a human or something of its own kind.

Sunny glanced at the tall mountains and spent a few seconds

watching as the white mist rolled down from their peaks, flowing down the jagged slopes like a waterfall made of clouds.

'...How beautiful.'

With a sigh, he turned away from the wall of mist that was still some distance away from the valley where the quarry was situated and concentrated on the corpse of the stone demon.

Whatever had killed it was not something Sunny would wish to meet in a battle. The flesh of the creature was, indeed, made of stone. That had not stopped the fearsome attackers, however. The carapace of the giant granite abomination was shattered in many places, and melted in others.

…But mostly, it was cut and pierced.

Apart from a few enormous wounds, there were numerous smaller ones, many of them looking as though they could have come from a sword, an axe, or a spear. And yet, he wasn't sure. Sunny was not really an expert in such things.

However, he was an expert in all things having to do with greed and avarice.

Instead of focusing on the nature of the damage done to the giant abomination, Sunny walked around and found its abdomen, which was damaged especially severely. With a reluctant sigh, he climbed atop the stone corpse… and then inside of it.

The other members of the cohort stared at him with expressions ranging from surprise to revulsion.

A couple of minutes later, Sunny climbed out of the dead demon and shook off stone dust from his armor and hair. Then, he glanced at his companions and frowned.

"What?"

Kai stared at him with a complicated expression, and then asked:

"Sunny? Ah, do you want to tell us something?"

Sunny gave him a nod and grinned.

"I do, actually. This thing was indeed killed by a human."

The charming archer raised an eyebrow and asked in a dubious tone:

"Really? How do you know?"

Sunny jumped down and shrugged.

"The Soul Shards are missing."

A few moments later, an expression of understanding appeared on Kai's face.

Indeed, most Nightmare Creatures had no use for the soul shards. Just like humans, who directly absorbed soul essence after killing one of their own kind, they fed from the kill itself as opposed to the act of retrieving and crushing the remnants of broken soul cores.

…If they weren't bizarre terrors like the Soul Devourer, of course. But the chances of encountering another one of those here were rather low.

It was reasonable to assume that the soul shards were removed by humans.

His discovery was solid enough proof of the fact that it was indeed the First Lord's cohort that had battled and slain the terrifying creature.

They had really found the signs of the lost expedition.

But there was another proof for this conclusion, this one irrefutable.

Nephis, who had wandered away from the remains of the demon at some point, suddenly called them over.

The members of the cohort glanced at each other, then slowly approached her, trying to understand what was it that she had found.

Changing Star was standing near one of the piles of rocks that were

littering the ground around the body of the dead creature, looking at it with a solemn expression. Most of them came from its shattered carapace, while some were created because the floor of the quarry was broken apart and churned during the ferocious battle.

Why was Nephis so interested in that one in particular?

Looking closer, Sunny suddenly realized that this pile of rocks was different from all others. It was lower, roughly oval in shape, its contour too perfect to be the result of a pure coincidence.

It seemed as though each rock was painstakingly placed here by a human hand, perhaps in hopes to make the pile as orderly and sturdy as possible.

Suddenly, a cold shiver ran down Sunny's spine. He finally realized what he was looking at.

This was not really a pile of rocks.

It was a grave.

Chapter-247: The Mist

Standing around the cairn, the members of the cohort looked at it with somber expressions — except for Cassie, who turned away and faced the mountainside, as though trying to hide her emotions.

Now that they knew what they were looking at, their mood suddenly became forlorn and solemn. People stranded on the Forgotten Shore were well acquainted with death and tragedy, but finding this lonely grave so far away from any place where another human could find it, lost under the alien grey sky of the Dream Realm, was still a poignant revelation.

None of them had ever met the Dreamers of the first cohort, but after living in the shadow of their legendary achievements and hearing stories of their deeds for so long, it felt as though this grave belonged to one of their own.

Because of how bleak and tense the reality of the Bright Castle was, it was easy to forget that in this cursed world, all of them were fellow humans. But in front of the quiet grave, the truth was stark and cutting: it was them alone against the endless tide of Nightmare Creatures, and every human life lost diminished them all.

Sunny sighed and noticed that there were words carved into one of the stones placed on top of the cairn. It took him a while to make sense of the inscription, because it wasn't written with the runes he had grown accustomed to. Instead, it was written in simple letters of the human language, which looked strange and alien in this forsaken land.

Cut into the stone by unknown means, a single sentence was left behind on the otherwise unmarked grave.

"Her nightmare is over"

With a heavy heart, Sunny silently repeated it several times. It was strange how much meaning could be expressed with so few words. They echoed in his mind and lingered there, leaving a deep and mournful mark.

'...Rest in peace, whoever you are. I... I hope that your dreams are sweet and serene now.'

With that, he turned away and gritted his teeth.

When would their own nightmares be over?

The other members of the cohort were slowly coming back from their sudden reverie. Kai sighed and looked at Changing Star, his face full of sadness.

"I guess… I guess this is what we've been looking for. The First Lord and his expedition definitely passed this way. But what now?"

Nephis threw a last glance at the grave and turned to face the charming archer.

"There should be an entrance to an old mine somewhere nearby. From what Cassie had seen, this is where they went."

Sunny frowned. Something in what she said made him uneasy. But why?

Turning his head, he looked at Cassie, who was still silently standing a few steps away from them, her head turned to the mountains. It seemed as though the blind girl was enjoying the sight of white mist that was flowing down the mountain slope, slowly approaching the valley.

She had been awfully quiet all this time.

With an ominous feeling suddenly gripping his heart, Sunny gestured to Nephis to draw her attention. Changing Star frowned, then followed his gaze and slightly changed in the face.

Walking over to her friend, she carefully placed her hand on the blind girl's shoulder. Instantly, Cassie flinched and turned around, her

face pale.

"...Cassie? Did you see something?"

There was an expression of terror written on the blind girl's face. For a few moments, she just breathed heavily, as though trying to control herself. Finally, she spoke, her voice quiet but steady:

"The mist... we must get underground before the mist comes. If not, all of us will die!"

Nephis didn't waste any time questioning Cassie further. Turning around, she shouted:

"Sunny, Night! Find the entrance to the mine, quick!"

A moment later, Kai rose into the air and dashed toward the giant amphitheater on the opposite side of the quarry. Sunny did not hesitate, too: his shadow detached from his feet and glided away with startling speed.

Despite the urgency of the situation, he remained calm.

'So… I guess there is a reason why we haven't met a single living creature in this place, after all.'

Sunny had expected something like this to happen from the very moment they entered the foothills of the Hollow Mountains. Even before learning about how dangerous these peaks were, he had already known that no land that the crimson coral was incapable of growing on could be safe.

"Caster, Effie! Prepare to move as soon as the scouts find anything!"

Glancing at the white wall of mist that was already starting to seep into the valley, Nephis lingered for a moment, then summoned her sword. Behind her, Cassie rose slightly above the ground and unsheathed the Quiet Dancer, holding the elegant rapier in her left hand.

Two transparent wings turned into a blur behind her back.

Looking at them, Sunny sighed and walked over to stand near the Stone Saint. His mind was preoccupied with perceiving the world through the shadow. Then, he closed his eyes to concentrate on his other senses.

The shadow and Kai found the entrance to the mine almost simultaneously. A tall archway was cut right into the side of the mountain, with false columns carved into the rock around it. The mouth of the tunnel was dark and ominous.

There was a twisting path leading away from the mine into the quarry. Sunny couldn't see where it exited the maze of stone blocks, but was sure that Kai would see it from above.

Opening his eyes, he noticed that the wall of mist was now looming above them, mere seconds from falling down into the quarry, and said:

"Follow me!"

With that, he ran toward the general direction of where the mine was situated. The others ran behind him, exerting as much speed as they could manage — except for Caster, of course.

Halfway to the wall of the quarry, Kai landed near them and gestured to a barely visible opening between the stone steps.

"There! Hurry!"

They entered the hidden path and ran as fast as they could, soon approaching the wide tunnel.

At the very edge of darkness, Sunny stopped for a second and looked back at the swiftly approaching wall of mist.

As he gazed into the milky fog, a cold and heavy feeling of dread suddenly grasped his heart.

Not wasting any more time, he turned around and dove into the shadows.

A few moments later, the mist swirled around the entrance of the

tunnel and devoured the rest of the world.

Chapter-248: Those Who Survived

Leaving the mouth of the tunnel and the swirling white mist behind, the cohort cautiously went further into the darkness. As they walked, they summoned the Memories that produced light to illuminate the way.

The tunnel leading into the mine was wide and spacious. Despite the ruthless flow of time, it had remained in perfect condition — just like the ancient wall that surrounded the Dark City. The floor was inclined and led down, deep into the belly of the mountain.

Sunny sighed, not happy with the idea that they had to travel further into this deadly region of the Dream Realm. Who knew what horrors lived in the darkness at the roots of the Hollow Mountains? The only thing that consoled him was that, with some luck, the cohort wouldn't have to go too far.

They just had to find the remains of the doomed expedition that had disappeared somewhere down below. He wasn't entirely comfortable hoping that those people had died sooner rather than later, but they were dead either way.

What Sunny cared about the most was for him and his companions to not follow suit.

Walking at the back of the party, he glanced at the five people in front of him.

How did Changing Star's cohort stack against that of the First Lord? Were they weaker, stronger, or just about the same?

His brow furrowed.

Regarding Nephis herself, he doubted that the young man who had led a group of Sleepers to conquer the Bright Castle could have been more powerful or driven than her, at least not at the start. However, he had much more time to accumulate power and resources before venturing into the Hollow Mountains to find his death.

Fifteen years ago, when he had entered the Dream Realm and got stranded on the Forgotten Shore, things were much different from now. The Immortal Flame clan was yet to fall, for one. In fact, it was not long after Broken Sword, Neph's father, had become the first human to conquer the Third Nightmare and achieve the rank of Saint.

Would the world be different if the First Lord managed to find the way out and returned to reality? Yes, most likely. If the era of the Nightmare Spell had shown anything to humanity, it was that history was often changed by individuals, as opposed to events and invisible currents. The influence one extraordinary person could exert on history in a time of adversity was hard to deny.

From everything that Sunny knew about the First Lord, a man like him could have done a lot to improve the position humanity was in. What a shame that he had perished in this godforsaken hell, the story of his incredible deeds known only to a handful of people as unfortunate as him.

But how many were there of such brilliant youths, killed before their time by the Nightmare Spell?

In the end, history was not written by the best, but by those who survived.

Glancing at the people walking in front of him, Sunny couldn't help but think:

'How many of us will survive?'

Each member of the cohort was incredibly strong. Just like Nephis was at least an equal to the First Lord, her companions were most likely equal to his.

Because of Effie's light-hearted and carefree demeanor, it was easy to forget how fearsome of a warrior she was. The huntress had not survived three years of stalking monsters on the cursed streets of the Dark City alone by accident. Hundreds upon hundreds of vicious Nightmare Creatures fell by her hand.

As much as Sunny hated to admit it, Caster was a true powerhouse among the Sleepers, too. His incredible Aspect Ability, outstanding skill, cold intelligence and the wide arsenal of inherited Memories made him a deadly threat to anyone foolish enough to become his enemy.

Kai was not as ferocious of a fighter as the core members of the cohort, but his ability to fly coupled with the mastery of the bow and the Ascended arrow that Sunny had sold him made him a real menace in a battle, too.

Cassie was not much of a fighter, but her gift was arguably more important than any combat Aspect Ability could ever be. Especially so on the Forgotten Shore, where inconceivable dangers lurked under each rock.

…And then there was Sunny himself.

Sunny was, perhaps, the deadliest of them all. If he wanted to, he could have killed every member of the cohort twice over.

With the exception of Nephis herself, of course.

If the two of them had to face each other in battle, he didn't count his chances too high.

…At least for now.

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As they walked deeper into the mine, there were more tunnels forking away from the main one. The cohort turned a few times, choosing the path that led further down underground.

Soon, the walls surrounding them changed. More and more, they were decorated with the intricate stone carving that the inhabitants

of the ancient city had loved so much.

At first, these carvings were strictly decorative and mostly senseless, shaped into beautiful patterns of lines and simple images. But then, slowly, something about them changed.

Sunny was, perhaps, the only one who paid attention to the carvings. Due to his passion for learning the history of this ancient civilization, he had spent a lot of time doing the same back in the Dark City, where there were a lot of similar things.

He was still planning to clear the floor of the ruined library of rubble and study the vast fresco that was hidden beneath — the project he had been working on before the events of these recent weeks had taken him away.

However, the condition of the carvings back in the ancient city was mostly terrible. The unknown disaster that had wiped out its inhabitants, the passage of time, and the Nightmare Creatures left most of them in ruins.

Here in the remote mine, however, the carvings were preserved in pristine condition.

When Sunny finally saw what was depicted on them, his breath became faster.

The answers to many questions that were tormenting him were right there, carved into these walls.

Chapter-249: Curse of Darkness

Depicted on the ancient engravings, a beautiful land was bathed in sunlight. Lush forests, glistening rivers, and fields of flowers surrounded human cities built of stone. From what Sunny could tell, this was the Forgotten Shore before the mysterious and terrifying curse had turned it into the desolate hell it was today.

In the next mural, the beautiful land rested under the sky that was full of stars. Suddenly, one of them fell to the ground, causing a wave of destruction to wash over the human cities. When people approached the center of the crater left behind by the falling star…

Sunny almost stumbled when he saw the next engraving. In it, a naked human figure was standing at the bottom of the crater, wreathed in light. The inhabitants of the stone cities were surrounding the radiant figure, dressed in archaic garments and armor.

The figure seemed beautiful and pure, as though untouched by the imperfections of the mundane world. What made Sunny lose his composure was not its beauty and not how eerily familiar the soft radiance emanated by its skin was, but...

Its face.

On it, three eyes were burning with pure, incandescent light. Two were just like that of a human, with the third one situated above the other ones, right in the middle of the creature's forehead.

…Just like that of the terrible skull that the walking colossus had shattered with his stone hammer in the middle of a raging storm.

'...What does it mean? What is this thing?'

To Sunny's dismay, the next engraving was heavily damaged. He

couldn't discern anything of what was depicted on it.

However, the one after that was in almost perfect condition.

On it, the radiant figure was kneeling on the ground, its chest pierced by the spear of the tallest human among the inhabitants of the beautiful land. What flowed from the terrible wound, however, was not blood, but an endless flood of pure darkness.

'Why... why did they attack it? What happened?'

Left without an answer, Sunny walked forward and soon reached the next mural. He saw darkness devouring the humans gathered around the fatally wounded creature and spread. Soon, it devoured the crater left by the fallen star, too.

And then, it devoured the entire world.

"...The curse of all-consuming darkness," he whispered.

Finally, Sunny got a glimpse at the origin of the terrible disaster that had destroyed this land and turned it into a hellish nightmare. Although the details of it were still unclear, one of the mysteries he had been trying to solve now had an answer.

But the story told by the engravings was not yet over. Walking further into the ancient mine, Sunny learned of what had happened next.

As the darkness spread across the world, it reached the skies. The stars were either devoured by it or fell down, turning the sky into a terrible, lightless abyss.

The starless void.

The sun never rose above the cursed land again, leaving humans trembling in the cold. Soon, horrifying creatures came from the darkness to devour them. The best and the brightest of the ancient civilization took arms to defend their cities, and for a while, they were able to resist the tide of monsters.

…But then, humans themselves started to turn into abominable

horrors.

At that point, Sunny felt a cold shiver running down his spine and couldn't help but tremble.

Not because he was affected by the tragic disaster that had befallen these ancient people.

But because it all seemed so terrifyingly familiar.

The details might not have been the same, but the end result was eerily similar to what was happening in the real world right now.

A curse that suddenly appeared and spread across the entire world. The horrible monsters that came from nowhere to attack settlements and devour humans. The champions who had taken charge of defending their kind from the abominable creatures. And the fact that some humans had begun turning into those creatures themselves.

Was it not the same as the Nightmare Spell spreading like a plague across the globe, the Nightmare Creatures coming through the Gates, the Awakened rising to fight against them, and the unfortunate souls who failed their First Nightmare transforming into monstrous abominations?

The only difference was that the story of the civilization of the Forgotten Shore was already over. Eventually, the curse had destroyed it. The people of his own world, however, were still trying to resist such fate.

But was it even possible to defeat fate? The inhabitants of the Forgotten Shore were proud and mighty. They were capable of building cities that stood for thousands of years and fighting against the most terrifying monsters on equal footing. And yet, in the end, they were utterly obliterated and wiped out. Their land had become a cursed desert.

Would the real world turn into a desolate hell like the Forgotten Shore too, one day?

With a dark expression on his face, Sunny turned away from the engraving he was staring at and walked away.

There were a few more left ahead, still.

On one of them, seven heroes came together from different parts of the dark land. Under their protection and guidance, people living in the darkness migrated from their half-destroyed cities and came to the shore of the vast crater. There, they built a new home for themselves, one surrounded by a mighty wall that no monster could scale or breach.

One of the heroes, a man depicted with a mason's hammer in his hand, was in charge of building the wall. Despite the fact that the part of the engraving depicting his face was damaged, it was unmistakably one of the seven founders of the Starlight Legion, the man whose statue had carried them across the Forgotten Shore.

In the second to last engraving, the mighty wall was finished, and the city was prospering amidst the darkness. The seven heroes stood at some distance from it, surrounding…

Sunny's eyes narrowed.

The seven heroes were surrounding an inconceivably tall tower. It loomed above them, connecting heaven and earth like the axis of the world. Despite its cyclopean height, the tower was still unfinished.

The Crimson Spire. Only it was not crimson yet, as there were no growths of cursed coral covering its walls.

On the last engraving, the tower was complete, and on top of it…

On top of it, a new sun was burning bright, bathing the land and the celebrating people in the light once again.

The darkness was gone.

Chapter-250: Defiant Oath

Sunny stared at the last engraving for a few moments, and then continued walking.

The revelations he had uncovered on the walls of the ancient mine gave him a lot to think about. The truth that he had been piecing together for a very long time was finally more complete than fragmented.

So, something had indeed fallen from the sky and put a start to the eventual destruction of this land. Sunny had suspected that this was the case for a while now, especially after witnessing the colossal impact crater that was situated between the Dark City and the Ashen Barrow.

At times, he had been almost ready to believe that it was really the result of the Vile Thieving Bird dropping the Weaver's eye "on the mortal realm below", as written in the description of the Lineage Memory he had consumed.

The Thieving Bird had gone mad after looking at the reflection of the -unknown- which was apparently forever frozen in the depths of Weaver's pupil. The madness and corruption that reigned over the Forgotten Shore were similar enough for him to draw a parallel.

However, now he knew that it had been an actual being that had fallen from the skies, wreathed in light and flame. A beautiful figure that emanated brilliant radiance and had three eyes on its terrible, perfect face.

Sunny didn't know what led the ancient humans to attack it, but they had killed the creature — perhaps managing such a feat only because it was already weakened by its fall from the heavens and the events that had sent it plummeting down.

But by doing so, they had unleashed the flood of darkness and caused the destruction of their land.

Sunny was under the impression that the annihilation of the ancient civilization had been instantaneous, but as it turned out, humans had continued to fight against the curse for a long time. Generations, even — that's why the founders of the Starlight Legion were described as being born in the all-consuming darkness.

He didn't know whether the monsters that came to feast on the human flesh had been contained within the body of the fallen being along with the ocean of darkness, or whether they were all humans corrupted by the curse — with those present at the moment of the creature's death becoming the most terrifying ones.

What he did know, however, was that the Starlight Legion had managed to push the monsters back and build an impregnable fortress for the humans under their protection. That fortress would later become the Dark City.

And then, the founders of the Legion had achieved something even more inconceivable. They had built the cyclopean Spire and somehow used it to…

To create an artificial star.

Yes, the sun shining above the Forgotten Shore was not real. It was, in fact, a human creation.

'...Speak about ambition.'

It was hard not to feel awe after learning that those seven madmen had actually managed to create a sun. They had made a defiant oath to return light to the cursed land and gone about it with terrifying resolve and sincerity.

The story depicted in the ancient engravings ended with a celebration. The forces of good had vanquished the curse of darkness and brought a new era of light and prosperity to the inhabitants of the ancient city.

…However, that was not where history ended.

Something happened between then and now that had caused the obliteration of the ancient civilization, the corruption of the Spire, and the appearance of the Crimson Labyrinth.

But what?

That was a mystery for another day. Perhaps he would be able to find the answer to it back at the Dark City.

What Sunny did note, however, was the difference between the dark reality shown in the engravings and the state the Forgotten Shore was in now.

Yes, the ancient murals showed a world completely devoid of light, but it was different from the hell that Sunny and the other members of the cohort knew. The engravings did not show the curse of darkness as a literal sea.

With no sun and no sea, there was no cycle of tides that turned the Forgotten Shore into an ocean of black water every night.

The dark sea had appeared at the same time as the Labyrinth, then? Or at least as the result of the same event. Sunny was sure that the two were connected.

But he didn't know what significance that information hid.

...The other thing he had noted was that, while the other members of the party were initially indifferent to the ancient engravings, at some point that changed.

When they had been walking past the mural depicting the radiant being with three incandescent eyes, Nephis had stopped and looked at it for several long moments.

Then, she turned her head away, lingered for a second, and continued walking.

Sunny had not missed that detail. However, he couldn't even begin to guess what it meant.

***

Some time later, they entered a wide circular hall. In the center of it, a dark chasm opened into the depths of the mountains, leading so far down that Sunny couldn't even see its bottom.

It looked like the gates of the Underworld.

Thousands of years ago, there were wooden ladders and platforms leading down the main shaft of the mine, as well as a system of ropes and pulleys to lower the miners and lift containers full of precious ores up. Of course, all of that had rotted and collapsed a long time ago.

With a sigh, Sunny glanced at Nephis and asked:

"We are climbing down, aren't we?"

Instead of answering, she simply summoned the golden rope and shrugged.

He shook his head.

"Wait. At least give me some time to scout ahead and see if anything is waiting for us at the bottom of this thing."

With that, he sent his shadow down the wall of the endless shaft. The shadow wasn't very ecstatic at the prospect of gliding down into the depths of the scary well, though. Giving Sunny a resentful glare, it sighed and dove down with visible reluctance.

A few minutes later, the shadow reached as far down as the range of Shadow Control allowed. It was still not at the bottom of the mine, but at least there were no primordial horrors in its sight.

Sunny summoned the Dark Wing and gave the members of the cohort a nod.

"We can proceed. Be ready, though. Who knows what might happen?"

Chapter-251: Boundary of the Underworld

Standing on the edge of the bottomless well, Sunny sighed and summoned the Prowling Thorn. Then, he commanded the Dark Wing to come to life and took a step into the emptiness.

The dragonfly wings of his enchanted cloak were too fragile to rely on them alone in a situation that posed unknown risks. It was better to have a backup at hand.

Softly gliding down, he descended in a straight line for a few moments, then made a turn and glanced at the other members of the party.

The golden rope had been thrown into the darkness. Nephis, Effie and Caster were already climbing down, while Kai hovered near them, ready to draw his bow should anything attack the cohort. Cassie was by his side, holding the Quiet Dancer in her hand.

The elegant rapier served as her guide as well as support, allowing the blind girl to make better use of the transparent wings. With it, she was able to zip around with considerable speed or stay in one place without any surface beneath her feet.

'Handy.'

Just like that, the cohort descended to the bottom of the ancient mine. Sunny was gliding down in a wide spiral, sometimes close enough to the wall of the well to touch it with his hand. He was slightly ahead of the rest of the group.

When the distance between them grew too much, he would insert the dagger into a crack in the stone and wait for others, attached to the vertical wall like a strange insect.

His shadow moved further and further down, exploring the darkness below.

Despite the tension that permeated the air, in the end, nothing had attacked the group of descending humans. They discovered the reason for this unexpected respite at the bottom of the mine.

Sunny was the first one to land on solid ground. With other members of the cohort still a few dozen meters away, for some time, he was left in complete darkness.

As soon as he took a step, something crunched under his foot. Looking down, Sunny saw a piece of pale bone.

A few meters away from him, the remains of a giant skeletal creature lay broken on the ground. It resembled a snake with hundreds of tiny claws growing from its belly and a terrifying, round maw. Glancing up, he judged that the length of the dead abomination was enough to coil around the whole shaft of the mine at least several times.

While Sunny was thinking, the other members of the cohort approached the ground. The light of their lantern Memories fell on him, then shone further, revealing the remains of the colossal bone worm.

Exposed by this light, a nimble shadow glided on the stone and attached itself to Sunny's feet.

Nephis was the first one to jump down. Glancing at the repulsive Nightmare Creature, she outstretched one hand and asked:

"Sunny?"

He shook his head.

"It's dead. Nothing is moving out here."

Soon, all of them were on the ground. Gathering around the giant worm, everyone had the same thought:

'Fighting that thing on the vertical wall of the well would have been a true nightmare.'

Sunny didn't know how the members of the lost expedition had managed to defeat the terrifying creature, but was thankful to them. He would not have wanted to test the durability of the Dark Wing if that thing suddenly lunged at him from the dark.

There was a disturbing question now in his mind, however.

If the cohort of the First Lord was strong and capable enough to slay the stone abomination that used to guard the quarry and the worm that lived in the well of the mine…

Then what kind of a horror had killed them all in the end?

With a dark expression on his face, Sunny turned away from the dead creature and walked into the darkness.

Not too far from the corpse of the abominable worm, they stumbled upon an abandoned campsite.

A makeshift firepit was built on the rock floor, with five large stones surrounding it for the humans to sit on. A bit further, a low barricade was constructed out of the rubble, protecting the camp from unwelcomed visitors.

The lost expedition had definitely been here.

Since they had been walking, climbing and running for the better half of the day, the cohort decided to settle for the night and continue the search tomorrow.

Soon, the orange glow of a bonfire chased away the darkness.

It was a bit strange to relax and cook food in the same place where the First Lord and his companions had rested and prepared theirs all those years ago. Sunny felt as though he was touching history.

Or, rather, making it.

However, he didn't have too much time for empty thoughts.

If what Nephis had told him at the start of this expedition was true, tomorrow… tomorrow was going to be his time to shine.

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The next day, the cohort ventured further into the tunnels of the ancient mine. No one could tell how deep underground they were exactly, but the feeling of countless tons of stone looming over their heads, ready to come crashing down and bury them under their terrible weight, was not a pleasant one.

They were in the belly of the mountains now.

After several hours of walking through narrow tunnels, Sunny suddenly felt a soft breeze touch his cheeks. A few minutes later, a distant rustle reached his ears.

The deeper they went into the darkness, the louder that rustle became, until finally turning into an easily discernable murmur of running water.

Soon, they reached the dark shore of a wide underground river.

The running water was black as ink, but not in the way that the waves of the cursed sea had been. There was no smell of salt in the air, too. Wisps of mist were rising above the surface of the subterranean river, swirling in the silent darkness.

It looked like a boundary of the Underworld.

There was a stone pillar built on the shore, and tied to it, a beautiful boat made of pale wood swayed gently on the cold black surface of the dark river.

Looking at the graceful boat, Sunny sighed.

It was time to earn his keep.

Chapter-252: Unseen

This was the last secret about the fate of the lost expedition that Cassie had gleaned from her visions. But even then, the knowledge she had received was fragmented and incomplete.

All she could tell the members of the cohort was that, once they crossed the dark river and until reaching the next boundary, they had to keep their eyes closed at all cost, no matter what happened. No living thing could see what lay beyond these cold waters and remain... whole.

At least that was what she told them.

Cassie didn't really know herself what would happen if someone failed to follow that rule, but said that she had never felt more terror than in the short moment before the vision showing her the fate of the lost expedition had shattered and everything had grown dark.

This was telling a lot, considering what kinds of horrors the blind girl saw in her vision routinely.

…In any case, this was where Sunny came in.

While looking through the eyes of the shadow was still too dangerous, he could lead the cohort to their destination with the help of his ability to sense space through the shapes of shadows populating it.

At least in theory.

Standing on the shore of the dark river, six humans tied the golden rope around their waists. When everyone was ready, Nephis took out six strips of cloth and a block of wax. Lighting a small white flame on her palm, she sighed and turned to Effie.

"You're first."

The huntress made a complicated face, but then obediently approached their leader.

What followed next looked simultaneously intimate and disturbing. Using her flames to melt the wax, Changing Star gently took Effie's face in her hands and, after the huntress shut her eyes tightly, sealed them with melted wax. Then, she tied the strip of cloth around Effie's head to hold it in place.

One after another, every member of the cohort went through the same procedure. When Sunny's turn came, he shifted slightly when Neph's cool hands touched his cheeks.

A few moments later, he was blind.

'That is… is this how Cassie lives?'

Commanding his shadow to not see anything, Sunny was left in utter darkness. However, he still had it better than the blind girl. His Shadow Sense was still working, at least.

With its help, Sunny could more or less tell what was where. This form of perception was vastly different from sight, but could serve the same purpose in a pinch, be it very poorly. If conditions were right.

Luckily, he had practiced navigating the world with the help of nothing else but Shadow Sense in the past. This was how he had defeated the strange basilisk creature in the Dark City, among other things.

Leading the group of staggering humans to the graceful boat, he helped them to board it and untied the rope holding it in place. Then, Sunny found the oar and pulled on it, propelling the boat across the dark river.

Soon, cold mist shrouded everything around.

The deeper into the mist they sailed, the more it felt like they were leaving one world behind and entering another.

A much darker, much more ancient, much more terrifying world.

No one felt compelled to speak, so the silence was broken only by the murmur of rushing water and the creaking of the wooden oar.

'This is not too bad. Yeah. I am not scared witless, at all.'

Calming himself down with these silly thoughts, Sunny continued to guide the boat.

However, one thing kept making him shiver.

Being surrounded by mist and having to keep his eyes closed, Sunny couldn't help but remember the harrowing encounter with the being that appeared in a veil of fog and tried and lure him into gazing at it using a stolen voice.

…Was this where it came from?

After some time had passed — he couldn't tell how much no matter how hard he tried — Sunny suddenly sensed a solid mass in the distance. This was the opposite shore of the dark river.

Soon, they were drawing near to it.

As the bottom of the boat scraped against stone, Sunny jumped to the pier and tied the rope around the stone pillar. Then, he helped the others disembark.

Turning his head, he sensed another shape swaying on the surface of the water. There was a second boat here, presumably the one First Lord and his companions used to cross.

But unlike Nephis and her cohort, there had not been an oracle in their ranks. No one had warned them to keep their eyes shut.

Maybe this was the reason why none of them had returned.

Turning his back to the river with a strong feeling of unease, Sunny faced the mouth of the tunnel that led deeper underground. Letting out a resentful sigh, he slightly tugged on the golden rope and took a step forward.

The other members of the cohort had no choice but to follow him.

A few seconds later, they disappeared into the tunnel, leaving the shore of the silent river behind.

As soon as Sunny stepped into the tunnel, he felt cold shivers running down his spine. Although he couldn't see anything about it, he could tell that it was different from the ones they had traversed earlier.

This one still felt like it had been cut through the flesh of the mountains by someone — or something — as opposed to being formed by a natural process. However, its creators were unmistakably different from the humans that had created the mine and the quarry outside.

Everything about it was more pronounced, more skillful. The shadows populating the tunnel were different, too.

They were much deeper, much darker. And much, much more… ancient.

Soon, the tunnel turned into a maze of wide passages, all filled with nothing but mist and silence.

'Another maze. Of course it's a maze. Everything in this damn place just has to be a maze…'

Before Sunny could finish the thought, though, he suddenly froze, paralyzed by fear.

Because right in front of them, he felt the presence of a shadow that was different from all the others.

…A human shadow.

Chapter-253: Without a Master

The human shadow stood lonesomely in the mist, strangely aloof and motionless. As Sunny pulled on the golden rope to command his companions to stop, it shifted slightly and turned away, then became still once again.

Sunny sensed a cold, dreadful feeling settle in his heart.

The possibility of encountering another human in this dark and terrifying place was already unsettling enough. He did not consider even for a second that one of the members of the lost expedition could have survived down here, in the darkness, for all these years. Not unless they were no longer human.

But even that was not the cause for the coldness and dread he felt.

The real reason had nothing to do with logic and everything to do with his unique Aspect. Because of it, Sunny sensed that there was something terribly, utterly wrong with the shadow.

The feeling he got from it was one of eerie and utter wrongness. However, it didn't seem to be dangerous or hostile. Instead, it felt lost, empty, and… mournful. The shadow was full of sorrow and anguish that he could not describe with words.

Sunny was not that empathetic when it came to humans, but strangely, he couldn't help but share in the suffering of this lonely shadow. Maybe because, in a sense, they were kin.

As he was observing the shadow, unsure what to do, it made a few steps in a random direction and then stopped hesitantly, lingering there without moving. Then, it walked back and froze once again.

It was as though the shadow was lost.

A few moments later, Sunny finally understood the nature of the deep feeling of wrongness he felt in the lonesome shadow. When he did, a cold shiver ran through his entire body.

The reason why this shadow was so strange and eerie was because it wasn't connected to anyone. There was no human casting it. Not anymore, at least.

The human that the shadow had once belonged to was gone, cut from existence by some unknown power. Sunny couldn't sense any bones anywhere, either. It was as if the human had not been killed, but simply… erased.

While the shadow remained to wander aimlessly in the mist for all eternity.

'What a terrible fate…'

But the question remained… what was he supposed to do now? The shadow was in his way. Sunny had to either walk past it or return back and try to find another way through the maze.

But what threat could this pitiful thing pose? It was just a shadow, after all. His own couldn't harm a fly no matter how hard it tried. This one had to be the same.

With a deep sigh, Sunny slowly walked forward. With each step he took, he could sense the lonesome shadow better.

…At some point, it sensed him, too.

Turning to face Sunny, the shadow hesitated for a few moments, then tentatively glided closer. He could feel an outburst of muted emotions radiating from it: surprise, hope… and then, sudden despair.

Realizing that he wasn't its long-lost master, the shadow froze. Its shoulders dropped.

Sensing the deep well of loneliness, anguish and sorrow in front of him, Sunny tilted his head to the side.

Then, following an impulse, he outstretched his hand to the shadow:

'Here… take my hand. You don't have to be alone anymore.'

The shadow trembled, as if it heard his silent invitation. Then, it lingered for a few moments and approached him with uncertainty. Finally, it raised its hand and tentatively placed it in the hand of his own shadow.

A moment later, it disappeared.

Sunny sighed.

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

Diving into the Soul Sea, he walked along the rows of silent shadows standing on the surface of the tranquil water. And there, just as he had expected, he saw a new one.

A shadow of a graceful young woman was standing among them, as motionless and still as the rest of them. Her anguish, sorrow, and loneliness were gone. The shadow seemed to finally be at peace.

Sunny looked at her for a few moments, his heart heavy. Finally, he said:

"Welcome. Rest now. Your… your nightmare is over."

With that, he left the silent sea and sighed again.

Standing in the darkness with his eyes sealed shut, Sunny remained motionless for some time.

Then, he pulled on the golden rope and led the cohort further into the mist.

Sunny didn't know how long they wandered around the dark maze. More than once, he had ended up at a dead-end and had to search for another path. It was hard to not lose track of all the turns of the twisting tunnels, but he had somehow managed to stay on track.

On the way, he had found three more shadows. Each of them was just like the first one, lost and lonesome.

And just like the first one, they eventually took his hand and were absorbed into his Soul Sea. The four of them — one young woman and three men — now stood silently together, united once again even though their masters were long gone.

...Seeing them together gave Sunny a little solace, no matter how misguided it was.

There were five stones arranged around the fire at the campsite left behind by the lost expedition, hinting that five people had descended into the ancient mine. Four of them had eventually perished in this eerie, dark place.

But no matter how hard Sunny searched, he couldn't find the fifth shadow.

The First Lord himself was not here.

Could it be that he had somehow managed to survive and leave the maze of mist?

At some point, Sunny felt someone pull on the golden rope. Turning around, he walked a few steps back and stopped near Cassie. Feeling his approach, the blind girl raised her hand and pointed at one of the tunnels.

Understanding what she wanted to say, Sunny led the cohort in that direction.

Soon, the sound of rushing water reached his ears.

Some time later, they came to the shore of another subterranean river.

They had reached the second boundary.

Chapter-254: The First Lord

For a moment, Sunny was afraid that they had been walking in circles all this time and now returned exactly to where they had started. But then, he calmed himself down and noted that this river, while as eerie as the one they had crossed on a wooden boat, was rather different.

He couldn't exactly explain it, but it didn't feel the same. Plus, there was no pier with two boats tied to stone pillars anywhere in sight… or rather, sense.

Instead, there was a bridge.

Sunny could feel its shadow falling on the cold water, solid and firm as the stone it was built from. The bridge arched over the river, leading far into the distance.

Not wishing to spend another minute in the terrible maze that no living thing could see if it hoped to remain alive, Sunny led the cohort toward the bridge.

If Cassie was correct, they would be safe after crossing the second river. Sunny surely hoped that it was true, because the long journey where he had to play the role of a guide for five blind people had been nothing short of exhausting.

After spending seven… or was it eight by now?... months on the Forgotten Shore, Sunny had thought that he possessed a high tolerance for terror. But this last ordeal tested the limits of his mental endurance.

Walking through that dark place with his sight taken away…

It was a miracle that Cassie had somehow managed to remain sane at all.

He tensed up when they entered the bridge, expecting for something dreadful to happen at the last moment. But the silence was not broken by anything except for the sound of rushing water, their steps, and laborious breathing.

The cohort walked on the bridge, leaving the dark maze behind. Soon, they could feel the mist surrounding them grow thinner.

And at some point, it was gone.

They crossed the river without any trouble and returned to solid ground again.

Making several more steps, Sunny stopped and finally allowed himself to tremble. Then, he opened his mouth and said in a hoarse voice:

"Are we through?"

Although Cassie had not said anything about the need to remain quiet, each of them subconsciously avoided speaking ever since entering the mist. Because of that, the sound of his own voice startled Sunny a little.

A few moments later, Cassie answered in a hesitant tone:

"I… I think so?"

Without wasting any more time, Sunny untied the cloth that covered his eyes and removed the wax from them. Then, he carefully opened them and looked around.

They were standing on a stone shore inside a vast cave, through which the underground river was flowing unobstructed. Some distance away from them, the wall of the cave came down, with a mouth of a wide tunnel visible in it.

By his side, other members of the cohort were removing the strips of cloth. Sunny could hear the sighs of relief coming from them.

However, his attention was instantly drawn to Nephis, who had already opened her calm grey eyes and was looking at something

behind him.

Turning around, Sunny followed her gaze… and froze.

Just a few meters away from them, on the shore of the dark river, he saw a human skeleton. It was sitting on the cold stones, its back straight, facing the water.

Unlike the ferocious undead from the catacombs of the Dark City, this one was tranquil and untouched by the corruption of the Forgotten Shore.

…This was the place where the First Lord of the Bright Castle had died.

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The young man whom the members of the cohort only knew by his title had died on the shores of the cold underground river, just a few meters away from the bridge that he had used to escape the terrible place which, according to Cassie, no living being should have been able to escape.

Somehow, he had survived even without knowing that anyone entering the mist had to keep their eyes closed at all times. But in the end, the wounds he had received there — or somewhere up ahead, perhaps — turned out to be too grievous.

Before the last vestiges of life abandoned him, the young man — the First Lord who had wrestled the Bright Castle from the Nightmare Creatures, created a safe place for the humans sent to the Forgotten Shore to live, and lead an expedition to find a way out of this cursed place — sat down and looked in the direction of the misty, dark maze.

…The place where his friends and companions had died, leaving him alone in the darkness of this forsaken underworld.

Looking at the skeleton that sat quietly on the shore of the river, Sunny couldn't help but feel a deep feeling of awe… and sorrow.

He had never met this young man, but somehow, it felt as though

they knew each other very well.

Everything that humans had on the Forgotten Shore was thanks to his bravery, power, and skill.

…What a shame that he had died here, in this lonesome place, with no one to share his last moments and tell the tale of his last deeds.

The skeleton was strangely well-preserved. It was sitting with its legs crossed, back straight, its hands resting on the hips, as if meditating. The skull of the First Lord gazed at the river with the dark chams of its empty eyes, strangely calm and at peace.

What Sunny noticed, though, was not the whiteness of the bone nor the eternal grin of the bare skull, but a thin strip of light metal resting on it like a humble crown.

There was a single bright gemstone on the metal band, placed right above the middle of the skull's forehead.

After the six of them gathered around the remains of the First Lord and stood there for a while in silence to express their respect for this extraordinary human, Nephis sighed and approached the skeleton.

Gently, she took the strip of metal and removed it from the First Lord's head.

…A moment later, the band suddenly broke into countless sparks of light, which then disappeared, absorbed into her soul core.

Sunny's eyes widened.

The crown of the First Lord… was a Memory.

Chapter-255: Dawn Shard

As the last spark of light disappeared, Nephis tilted her head to the side and remained silent for a few moments. Then, she lowered her gaze and said, addressing the First Lord:

"Thank you."

She hesitated, as though wishing to say more, but eventually just took a step back.

Kai, however, wasn't that reserved. Bowing deeply, he remained with his head down for a while, then straightened his back, looked at the skeleton, and voiced something that a few of them must have been thinking:

"Thank you. We will… we will finish what you started."

His words echoed above the cold water, eventually disappearing into the darkness. A heavy silence settled above the shore of the underground river.

A few seconds later, the charming archer turned to the rest of them and asked with uncertainty:

"I think… should we bury him?"

The members of the cohort looked at each other. Before anyone could voice their opinion, though, Sunny suddenly spoke:

"No. Just leave him as he is. He wanted to be closer to his friends when he died, so… just don't touch him."

With that, he turned his head and looked away.

Since the First Lord died outside of the terrible maze, his shadow was gone, too. Now it was just dumb and empty, like most shadows cast

by inanimate objects. He had not shared in the harrowing fate of his companions, which meant that Sunny couldn't help him reunite with them… even slightly.

Neither could they bring the remains of the First Lord back outside, to bury him near the girl who had died in the quarry.

It was better to just leave him be.

'Forget about it. Think of something else.'

Sunny had other matters to consider, anyway.

That strange Memory that Nephis had absorbed… he had never even heard of a Memory that could exist outside of someone's soul. Had the First Lord somehow relinquished the ownership of it, or was this a quality that all Shard Memories possessed?

And it was, without a doubt, another Shard Memory — just like Effie's spear and his own stalwart blade. That Memory was the reason why Changing Star had ventured on this expedition, to begin with. The thing that was supposed to somehow give her a chance of defeating Gunlaug.

Sunny stared at Nephis, then said:

"That headband… what is it called? No, actually, let me guess. Dawn Shard? Dusk Shard?"

Neph looked at him and didn't answer. Her ivory face was calm and inexorable.

Sunny grinned.

"...Full of secrets, are we?"

A hint of some deep, sharp emotion appeared in her cold grey eyes. A few moments later, she said:

"Weren't you the one who made it clear that you don't want to be a true member of this cohort? You chose to be a hired blade yourself… did you not? Why should I share my secrets with you?"

Sunny remained silent for a bit, then sighed.

"Well… fair enough. I did, and you have no good reason to share anything with me."

Suddenly, Nephis smiled.

"You can change your mind, you know. If you do, I'll naturally tell you everything."

He stared at her for a while, then shook his head.

"No, no need. Answer me one question, though. How exactly is that thing supposed to help us defeat Gunlaug?"

Changing Star lingered for a bit, then simply shrugged.

"See for yourself."

A moment later, the headband left behind by the First Lord weaved itself from sparks of light on her forehead. The bright gemstone in its center softly gleamed.

And then, something about the world around Sunny changed.

'W—what…'

He blinked a couple of times, then slowly lowered his gaze and looked at the fabric of the Puppeteer's Shroud.

Or, rather, on the spellweave beneath it.

What he saw left Sunny breathless.

The five glowing embers that served as nexuses for the complicated pattern of ethereal strings permeating the Memory suddenly shone brighter.

Much, much brighter.

In fact, their radiance was now almost as intense as of those inside the black onyx armor he had purchased at the Memory Market. Which was… which was…

An Ascended Memory.

'What the hell?'

Pulling on the thread tied around his neck, Sunny fished out the Blood Blossom from under his armor and stared at it, perplexed. The two embers inside the intricate pendant had become much brighter, too.

Not knowing that Sunny had the ability to peer into the inner weave of Memories, Nephis explained:

"The Dawn Shard possesses a single, but also singularly powerful enchantment. It empowers all Memories around it. The area of effect of the enchantment is very large… but the enhancement it provides is ever larger."

'...You don't say!'

Staring at his Memories, Sunny felt as though he was on the verge of being dumbstruck. Singular was the right word to describe the effect of the Dawn Shard. He had never heard of a Memory being capable of rising the power of another one by almost an entire rank…

'Wait, did she say… all Memories?'

All Memories… all of them… in a very large radius?

'Impossible!'

With that crown on her head, Nephis would not only be able to stand a chance in a fight against Gunlaug, but also make each one of her followers so much more dangerous. She would become a perfect general for a small army of Awakened.

… But wasn't there something wrong with that statement?

Sunny frowned.

'All Memories… hold on. All?'

Glancing at Changing Star, he asked:

"So that thing makes every Memory around you vastly more powerful?"

Nephis gave him a silent nod.

Sunny's frown deepened.

"Then do you not see a problem here? Won't it enhance that damn golden armor of Gunlaug's, too? How exactly does it give you a chance against him, then?"

She lingered for a few moments, then smiled slightly.

"It would not, would it? But, hey… do you want me to tell you another secret?"

Sunny glared at her without saying anything. He knew better than to get himself into such a clumsy trap.

Only, as it turned out, there was no trap. Nephis just waited for a bit and continued:

"It will help me because the golden armor Gunalug wears is not a Memory."

Before he could say anything, she added:

"In fact, it is an Echo."

Chapter-256: True Reason

Sunny was silent for a while.

An Echo… that weird golden armor was actually a copy of some strange Corrupted Nightmare Creature?

What kind of creature took the shape of an armor?

But then again, the fact that it looked like an armor didn't mean that it was all it could look like. The main trait of the golden armor was that it seemed to be made out of liquid metal. That metal always flowed and moved around, enveloping Gunlaug's body like a second layer of skin.

The only thing that never changed was the mirror-like surface that served him as a face.

It wasn't impossible to imagine that the mass of living metal was, in fact, not a Memory but a bizarre Echo.

Not impossible, but a bit of a stretch.

Glancing at Nephis, Sunny asked:

"How do you even know this?"

She hesitated for a few moments, then said:

"You already know that we have an ally inside the castle. She was the one who told us."

That mysterious spy again… Sunny became even more convinced that this person was of a very high rank among the Bright Lord's servants. Only someone extremely close to him would know such an important secret.

In fact, Sunny expected that the paranoid tyrant would never let anyone learn of it.

Why would one of Gunlaug's most loyal minions help his enemy? Was it all an elaborate trap orchestrated by the Bright Lord himself?

Looking at Changing Star with a deep scowl on his face, he asked:

"Can this ally of yours even be trusted?"

If he was right in his guess about the identity of the spy... well, things would become complicated.

She was silent for a while, then said evenly:

"Trusted? Not really… never, actually. However, we can trust in the information that was provided to us."

He raised his eyebrows.

"And why is that?"

Nephis shrugged and then answered, her voice indifferent:

"Because I am the only chance anyone here has of ever getting out of this cursed place. And Gunlaug is not."

'Interesting…'

So, one of the top ranks of the Bright Lord's forces was an opportunist who desired to return to the real world desperately enough to risk betraying the ruthless tyrant. That person had been loyal to Gunlaug because there was no better alternative, but then changed sides once the last daughter of the Immortal Flame clan appeared like a miracle and promised to save the people of the Forgotten Shore.

That ally of hers was either swayed by Neph's rhetoric like the rest of the unfortunate fools in the Dark City or was confident of ending up among the few lucky people who would actually have the chance of surviving what was about to come.

…Or just knew something that Sunny did not.

In any case, Changing Star seemed to be confident in the information the spy provided, so he did not see the point of doubting it. She wasn't any more naive or trusting than he was, after all.

Nephis had learned the art of cynicism from the best.

Kai, who had been listening to their conversation with a fair bit of curiosity, suddenly cleared his throat.

"Uh… I am very sorry to interrupt you guys. But I just wanted to ask — since we have found the remains of the First Lord and came into possession of this Memory you were discussing… does that mean that the expedition is over? Have we actually accomplished our goal? Really?"

That, indeed, would seem to be the case.

However, Sunny knew better.

With a friendly smile, he shook his head.

"No. No, buddy, the goal of this expedition has not been achieved yet."

The charming archer looked at him with surprise:

"But… didn't we get the thing that will help us defeat Gunlaug?"

Nephis was staring at Sunny too, a subtle smile on her lips.

"Yeah, Sunny. What else do we have to do? Do tell."

He grinned.

"Well, it's very simple, really. Yes, you told us that the reason for this adventure of ours was to find the means of overthrowing the Bright Lord, and it certainly was a reason. But it's not the whole reason, is it?"

Cassie turned her head slightly to listen to him and sighed.

Caster's face, meanwhile, had turned grim. Effie didn't seem to care

one way or another.

Nephis, on the other hand, just smiled wider.

"What is the whole reason then?"

Sunny gestured at the mouth of the tunnel in front of them.

"To finish what the First Lord had started, of course."

Kai was looking between him and Changing Star, unsure of what was going on.

"Uh... what do you mean? Exactly?"

Sunny shrugged.

"Think about it, Kai. We saw the same map. What were the symbols drawn at the very edge of it, near the place where the First Lord's expedition had disappeared?"

The charming archer frowned.

"That… uh. There were… three of them? A crown, a question mark. And a red cross?"

Sunny smiled.

"Exactly. There were six crosses drawn on the map, each marking one of the headless statues. Two to the east of the Dark City, one to the north, one to the west, and two to the south. We had visited one of the two statues situated to the south already. That's where the Spider Matriarch had weaved her nest."

He turned to Nephis and said, his smile gone:

"So the truth of it all is that the First Lord never really intended to find a way through the Hollow Mountains, isn't it? He wasn't a fool who would do something so misguided. No, he came to this godforsaken place for the same reason that we are here. To find the last statue."

Changing Star was silent for a bit.

When the silence was on the verge of growing uncomfortable, she suddenly said:

"That is correct."

Kai stared at her in astonishment.

"But… why? No, wait… what's so important about that statue?"

Nephis sighed.

"This is something that people can only volunteer to do. Anyone who doesn't wish to proceed can stay behind and avoid risking their lives in the battle. In fact, some of us probably should."

She turned to face the tunnel, remained silent for a bit, and then said:

"Yes, somewhere up ahead lies another ancient statue. There will be a powerful creature guarding it. I don't know what that guardian is, exactly, but we have to kill it. Anyone who is willing to fight can join me. Others can stay back and wait for my return."

She glanced at the members of the cohort and added:

"However, if you do join me, you'll have to follow one simple rule. No matter what happens, it's imperative that you don't deliver the final blow to the creature... unless you have reached and touched the statue first."

Chapter-257: Nightmare Champion

'Ah. So that is how it works.'

Initially, Sunny had suspected that the mysterious Shard Memories were just rewarded to those who managed to slay certain powerful Nightmare Creatures who dwelled close to the headless statues.

The truth, however, turned out to be more complicated. The creature itself, most likely, did not even matter — it was the act of vanquishing a powerful foe after coming in contact with a statue that summoned the Memory from oblivion.

That was why they had received the Midnight Shard before even learning about how important these ancient monuments were. Sunny, Nephis and Cassie had taken shelter atop the statue of the ancient knight and killed the Carapace Demon long after.

But no, that didn't make a lot of sense. If this was true, Sunny would have received another Shard Memory after defeating the Corpse Eater. So… not any powerful abomination would do.

Each statue seemed to have a... a Nightmare Champion tied to it by some invisible bond. The Carapace Demon, whom the creatures described as cursed soldiers of the fallen legion used to obey, was connected to the statue of the Knight.

The Iron Matriarch was tied to the statue of the Hunter.

Which statue had the Dawn Shard come from? The Builder, whose monument had somehow come to life and was now wandering the Forgotten Shore? Rumors said that the First Lord chased it around the Labyrinth for a long time, after all.

But somehow, Sunny felt that the metal headband had nothing to do with the walking colossus.

'So many questions.'

How many champions were still around, anyway? Nephis had not even tried to search for one tied to the Builder, nor for one tied to the Priestess. How many Shard Memories were already in the hands of humans?

Among the members of the cohort, there were now three. And they were about to challenge some abominable horror for a chance of receiving the fourth one.

'...Why do I even assume that there are only three?'

Sunny tilted his head.

Indeed, the fact that he had only seen the Midnight Shard, the Zenith Shard, and the Dawn Shard did not mean that Changing Star had not gotten other ones already. Not counting the Memory they were currently hunting, three more were unaccounted for.

How many had she found already?

He smiled darkly.

'Well… it's going to be revealed sooner or later. Right now, however, there is a more pressing issue...'

Glancing at Nephis, he asked:

"What happens if I get the Memory? As you reminded so astutely, I am not one of your lackeys. That would throw a wrench in your plans, wouldn't it?"

Sunny couldn't imagine Changing Star leaving something that important to chance.

However, to his surprise, she just shrugged:

"Keep it, if you want."

He frowned.

Why was Nephis so nonchalant about the possibility of a Shard Memory falling into his hands? Wait… why was she so indifferent about him already possessing the Midnight Shard?

One possible explanation was that it didn't matter who held the Shard Memory — as long as it was in human hands. The other explanation… made Sunny very uncomfortable.

Maybe she was just sure that fate would push the two in the same direction. If this was true, then it didn't really matter which one of them possessed the Shards.

He lingered for a bit, then shook his head and said:

"...Well, what are we waiting for? You didn't really expect any of us to stay behind while others fight, right? Let's go and hunt this monster."

Honestly, while Sunny couldn't even imagine what type of terrible creature guarded the hidden statue, he was almost excited to find out.

He wanted to see what the six of them were capable of under the miraculous effect of the Dawn Shard...

Himself in particular.

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Eventually, they arrived at a vast cavern situated somewhere in the depths of the draconian mountains. The cavern was large enough to fit the entire Bright Castle — and the hill it stood upon — inside of it. Witnessing its size, Sunny got an inkling that there was a reason why these mountains were called Hollow.

As his sight pierced the darkness ruling over the vast cavern, Sunny couldn't help but feel a deep sense of awe.

The floor of it was covered by black sand, while its walls glistened like obsidian. In the center of the cavern stood a giant pillar of dark

stone. It was surrounded by massive scaffolds, which nevertheless looked tiny and insignificant on its surface.

The silhouette of an unfinished statue was easily discernable, cut from the giant pillar by the unknown sculptor. Its upper torso was almost finished, while the lower half was still encased inside the stone.

It was as though a dark giant was struggling to free himself from the pillar of stone that imprisoned him.

With a feeling of surprise, Sunny realized that he recognized the details of the unfinished giant's armor and shield. They were eerily similar to the armaments that the Black Knight guarding the ruined cathedral wore.

…And to the ones the Stone Saint wielded, too.

Looking up, he made sure that the head of the giant statue was missing.

'...Of course it is.'

All of that only took a fraction of a second.

Then, Sunny hastily looked down, trying to notice the guardian of this obsidian cave before the creature noticed them.

…But it was too late.

As soon as the members of the cohort entered the cavern, something moved in the darkness at the base of the statue, and then stepped forward.

Sunny shivered.

'Damnation!'

Standing on the black sand, a monstrous creature that resembled a cross between a lion and a raven stretched its numerous limbs. Its body was pale as a corpse, while its head and chest were covered with dark feathers. It was massive in size, with muscles rolling like

steel cables under the skin.

The creature had two powerful hind legs and six more protruding messily from its wide chest, each ending with a set of deadly claws. But the most terrifying feature it possessed was a long, jagged black beak.

It was a Spire...

"Messenger!"

That was all Sunny had time to yell before the vile abomination lunged forward, exploding into a whirlwind of hunger, madness, and death.

Chapter-258: Herald of the Crimson Terror

Sunny had already faced off against a Spire Messenger once.

Back then, the vile creature had killed several experienced hunters in a span of just a few seconds, and the rest had only been spared this fate because of Effie's strength…

That and the fact that the Messenger had no need to fight them and chose to retreat and search for easier prey.

There was nowhere to retreat in this hidden cavern. Sunny didn't even know how the flying abomination had gotten here in the first place.

However, he was not the same inexperienced kid he had been all those months ago, either.

Sunny had grown considerably stronger. His arsenal of Memories was better now. His skill and technique were far beyond what he had known in the past, and his kill count had crossed a hundred Nightmare Creatures a long time ago.

There was the Stone Saint, too.

But, most importantly, his Memories were empowered by the Crown of Dawn.

Theoretically, Sunny could stack three augmentations on the Midnight Shard — one from his shadow, one from the miraculous crown, and one from the Blood Blossom, as long as someone managed to make the Messenger bleed.

Hopefully, that would be enough to breach the gap between a

dormant human and a Fallen Beast and allow him to actually wound the abomination, unlike the previous two times he had tried to cut into the flesh of similar horrors — Corpse Eater and the giant eel that had tried to hitch a ride on the ancient colossus.

…But first, he had to survive.

Judging that the Puppeteer's Shroud had a decent chance of withstanding a blow from the Messenger thanks to the enhancement of the Dawn Shard, but also not even remotely willing to put that to the test, Sunny dove to the side.

A moment later, the massive abomination collided against two shields — one belonging to Effie, the other to the Stone Saint. The terrible beak came down, aiming at the huntress…

If it was before, the round shield that protected Effie from knee to shoulder would have been easily pierced and torn apart, as if it was made out of paper instead of metal. But due to the empowering aura that emanated from the Dawn Shard, it somehow held.

The force of the impact, however, still threw both of them back. Even Shadow Saint, whose flesh was made of stone and weighed accordingly, was launched into the air like a doll made of feathers and rags.

But they had bought the cohort the precious second to regroup and counterattack.

As Kai and Cassie flew in different directions, creating some distance between them and the ferocious abomination, Nephis and Caster attacked from the sides. One sword shined with brilliant white radiance, while the other gleamed with ghostly green light.

However, the Messenger was still terrifyingly formidable. The Memories wielded by the cohort might have been enhanced, but their masters remained the same. They couldn't compete with a Fallen creature in terms of raw power and speed.

Two of the beast's six front limbs swiped forward, deflecting the swords. Two more shot at the attacking humans, forcing them to

retreat while barely staying alive.

…Then, the Messenger twisted its neck and caught Kai in its sight.

Its powerful black wings lashed down, creating a small hurricane that threw Nephis and Caster aside. Using powerful hind legs to throw itself into the air, the abomination lunged at the retreating archer, who twisted his body in a desperate attempt to aim his bow.

...And then, suddenly, a triangular blade cut an arc around one of the legs and tied an invisible string around it.

'Crap!'

That was all Sunny had time to think before his hand was jerked forward with incredible force.

However, this was exactly what he wanted.

With the Dark Wing turning into a blur behind his back, Sunny used the momentum of the pull to turn his laughably slow levitation into real flight.

In fact, he shot in the direction of the Messenger as though someone had launched him from a cannon.

The Midnight Shard flashed through the air and bit into the abomination's flesh.

'Do it!'

Indeed, with both the shadow and the Dawn Shard augmenting it, the stalwart blade was able to cut into the flesh of the Fallen Beast. Granted, it felt as though he was trying to cut stone.

But it was enough.

Sunny aimed at the base of the Messenger's wing. With all the speed given to him by the combination of using the Dark Wing to levitate and the Prowling Thorn to create momentum, the blow Sunny had delivered was truly devastating. In fact, it was so forceful that every bone in his hand almost shattered.

But he wasn't the one on the sharp end of the sword.

The Midnight Shard cut deep into the wing of the vile abomination, sending rivers of blood streaming down its pale body. As soon as they did, the enchantment of the Blood Blossom awakened, making the blade even sharper. The elegant tachi tore through the wing, crippling it.

The Messenger suddenly lost control of its flight and crashed back to the ground.

'Eat dust, bastard!'

After a moment of glee, however, Sunny hurriedly dismissed the Dark Wing and plummeted down, landing on the sand some distance away from the monstrous beast.

While gliding all the way back to the floor of the cavern would have been more comfortable, he wasn't going to become a sitting duck. Crippled wing or not, the Messenger could still jump and use the other one.

Maybe...

At the same time as Sunny hit the ground and rolled, a menacing black arrow suddenly fell from above, piercing the second wing of the fearsome creature. There was no blood coming from the wound, though — the arrow greedily drank it, preventing the Blood Blossom augmentation from growing a bit stronger.

The abomination did not stagger and slowly turn into a mummy like the iron spiders had, however. It simply shook its body, causing the arrow to shatter and crumble into a stream of white sparks.

But Sunny didn't see any of that.

With his back to the Messenger, he was already running toward the giant statue with all the speed he had.

Chapter-259: Bloody Mayhem

Sunny ran to the statue with every bit of speed he could manage. Which was quite a considerable amount, by human standards... no, even by those of other Sleepers.

As the wind whistled in his ears, the shadow flew off the blade of the Midnight Shard and turned around, observing the wounded abomination. Despite the fact that its wings were mangled, the Messenger did not seem perturbed. On the contrary, it opened its terrible beak and let out a blood-curdling shriek, then lunged at the tiny humans with even more bestial fury.

'...I think it's not happy!'

Despite the mortal peril his companions found themselves in, Sunny did not stop to help them. Nephis had said that the creature guarding the cave had to be killed by a person who had touched the ancient statue — until someone did, this battle was nothing but a futile and stupidly dangerous game.

The essence of combat was murder, after all. If no one truly aimed to kill the damn thing, how could they ever hope to survive?

So Sunny was helping them after all, in a way.

Behind him, things weren't going well for the cohort. The Messenger was too big, too strong, too swift for a group of Sleepers, no matter how talented. It was already a miracle that none of them had been torn to pieces already.

But how long would that last?

As the shadow watched, the terrifying beak came down again… and once again, bounced off Effie's stalwart shield.

However, this time, a wide crack appeared on the surface of the round shield.

Before the huntress could even react, several powerful limbs shot at the cracked shield, each striking it with the force of a cannonball. Finally, the Memory gave in and shattered — along with Effie's arm. Sunny saw fragments of bone piercing her olive skin as it twisted at an unnatural angle.

'Damn! Faster!'

As the pillar of dark stone approached, he watched the Messenger try to finish the wounded huntress off and be thwarted by the Stone Saint. Simultaneously, Nephis managed to penetrate the barrier created by the creature's front limbs. Her sword flashed and bit into the pale flesh, leaving a deep gash on the abomination's side.

Judging that he was far enough to not be afraid of a sudden attack aimed at his back, Sunny commanded the shadow to turn around and return to his side. His view of the battle immediately disappeared, and soon, the shadow caught up and wrapped itself around his body.

Sunny's speed doubled.

Pursued by the sounds of a ferocious battle, he neared the unfinished statue.

However, before he could touch it, a human figure suddenly appeared in front of him in a blur and slid on the black sand, stopping right in front of the stone pillar. It was Caster.

The proud Legacy didn't look all too well. His shiny scale armor was torn by the claws of the terrible beast, leaving four deep wounds on his muscular chest. Blood was streaming from them, leaving the handsome young man pale and disheveled.

No, it wasn't just that. Caster seemed a bit off, somehow… Sunny just couldn't tell what was wrong with him exactly. He did notice, however, a crystal amulet in the form of an hourglass hanging on a silver chain around his neck.

'What is that? A charm Memory? I didn't know that Caster had a

charm…'

Not wasting any time, the Legacy put his bloodied hand on the statue and closed his eyes for a moment.

'...He wasn't wearing one back on the marble arch. Right?'

Opening his eyes a second later, Caster glanced at Sunny with a dark expression and turned into a blur once again, rushing back to rejoin the battle.

Just as soon as he disappeared, Sunny crashed into the stone pillar, unceremoniously using it to stop his momentum. Bouncing off the hard surface, he rolled on the ground and shakily rose to his feet.

'Agh! Dammit! That hurt!'

That counted as touching the statue… right?

Had to.

Glancing back, Sunny saw another Blood Arrow piercing the flesh of the Spire Messenger and shattering a moment later. It wasn't destroyed, at least, just returned to Kai.

Quiet Dancer was zipping around the massive abomination, aiming at its eyes. The elegant rapier was an Echo, and as such did not enjoy the gift of the Dawn Shard, so it was more of a nuisance than a real threat to the beast. Still, it managed to deliver a couple of shallow cuts, causing the bastard to bleed.

That was exactly what Sunny needed — blood, as much blood as possible.

Launching himself forward, he held the Midnight Shard behind him and dashed toward the Messenger.

'Let's see which one of us can kill it first, Caster. Wouldn't it be funny if an outskirt rat like me got a third Ascended Memory, while a lofty Legacy like you still had none?'

Some distance away from his prey, Sunny commanded the Stone

Saint to switch her battle style.

The one the menacing Shadow liked to use the most — or simply saw as most suited to her equipment and the situation — was deliberate, elegant, and steady. But that wasn't what Sunny needed right now.

What he needed was carnage, savagery, and bloody mayhem.

Lingering for a fraction of a second, the Stone Saint suddenly threw her shield away, grasped her sword with both hands, and lunged forward. Any sort of grace she had possessed earlier was now gone. Instead of a noble knight, the Shadow now appeared as a barbarous butcher.

It seemed as though she cared neither about self-preservation nor about protecting the members of the cohort anymore. She didn't even care about killing the enemy that much. All she aimed to do was inflict the maximum amount of pain, the maximum amount of damage, and, most importantly, the maximum amount of bleeding.

Just like Sunny had commanded her to do.

As he ran back, more and more small, but heavily bleeding wounds appeared on the Messenger's massive frame. It's pale body was now half-covered in dark blood. Caster's enchanted sword added one or two, but most came from the berserk Shadow and Changing Star.

Effie was still in the fight, as well. Despite the fact that her arm was severely broken and there was bloody foam on her lips, the beautiful spear broke through the abomination's defenses and left a bloody mark on its skin, too.

But none of these attacks were powerful enough to end the creature once and for all.

Already nearing the scene of the massacre, Sunny willed his shadow to flow onto the Midnight Shard. The power of the Dawn Shard was burning inside of it, making the stalwart blade sing.

And on top of it all, the vile Blood Blossom was filling it with insatiable bloodlust and hunger.

Without slowing down, Sunny lunged at the Spire Messenger… and fell on his back. As momentum pushed him forward, he slid on the black sand and thrust the Midnight Shard upward.

Piercing the abdomen of the terrible creature, the razor-sharp sword easily cut through skin and muscle, gutting the abomination and causing it to stagger and fall.

Chapter-260: How to be a Hero

Indeed, with so much blood streaming down the Messenger's pale body, the savage augmentation of the Blood Blossom had grown vastly more powerful.

If before Sunny had felt as though he was cutting stone, now the Midnight Shard sliced through the tough flesh of the abomination with just a moderate amount of trouble. Of course, the fact that it was aimed at the soft belly of the monster instead of the adamantine black feather also played its part.

The tachi cut through the pale skin and muscle tissue, tearing its abdomen open.

As blood, guts and viscera fell from the terrible wound, Sunny slid from under the massive creature — just in time to avoid being crushed under its weight.

Even then, however, the Messenger was not yet dead.

'...What?! Curses!'

Lying on his back in an awkward position, Sunny was momentarily left defenseless. He had hoped that his strike would if not kill the monstrous abomination outright, then at least leave it stunned for a few seconds, giving him time to disengage and get away to a safe distance.

But the creature seemed to be impervious to pain and the fear of death that all living beings felt. Despite receiving a mortal wound, it only became more ferocious.

Staggered by the unexpected attack, the Messenger lost balance and fell to the ground. Its head hit the black sand, sending a cloud of it into the air.

…Then, its round corvine eye locked onto Sunny and flushed with eerie madness.

Knowing that he was not going to be fast enough, Sunny desperately tried to roll away. But it was too late. The terrifying jagged beak shot in his direction, threatening to impale him through the chest.

'Damn it a…'

However, at the last moment, a human figure in an elegant black and white armor suddenly appeared between him and the abhorrent beast. The incandescent sword lashed out, pushing the beak slightly to the side.

As the result, the Messenger failed to kill Sunny. Instead, the beak pierced the Starlight Legion Armor and tore through Changing Star's shoulder, almost severing her left arm. Nephis was thrown aside in a rain of blood, while the abomination opened its mouth and let out another deafening shriek.

For a moment, time slowed.

Sunny, who had just rose to one knee, noticed a sword surrounded by ghostly green lights approaching the Messenger's neck. Caster was seconds away from finishing the cursed creature off…

But before he got the chance, a heavy triangular dagger flashed in the air and sunk into the creature's eye, penetrating through it deep enough to reach the brain.

The Messenger froze. Its ugly raven-like head swayed slightly. The beak fell open, revealing rows of sharp teeth and a long, wet, crimson tongue.

Looking at the monster with a dark expression, Sunny pulled on the string of the Prowling Thorn, wreaking havoc inside its skull. The kunai tore through the round black eye on the way back, flying into the air in a stream of blood, bone, and chunks of brain matter.

Finally, the creature convulsed and crashed onto the ground.

Its eyes dimmed, then glossed over.

The corner of Sunny's mouth curled upward.

[You have slain a Fallen Monster, Cursed Herald.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

'Come on!'

[...You have received a Memory.]

A triumphant gleam appeared in his dark eyes.

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The cohort was in a pathetic state.

Effie had the bones in her arm shattered into tiny pieces, with sharp splinters tearing through her skin. Her ribs and lungs were wounded, too. Caster was bleeding heavily from the four gashes left on his torso by the Messenger's claws. Kai lost too much blood to the Blood Arrow and was now on the verge of fainting.

Neph's left arm was partially severed and barely attached to her body. The sight of it was ghastly.

Even the Stone Saint was severely damaged.

Only Sunny and Cassie were more or less in one piece.

It was all worth it, though. The Spire Messenger was actually dead, while they were not.

Lying on the black sand, Effie suddenly laughed. Sunny gave her a strange look.

"Have you lost your mind? What are you laughing at?"

The huntress shrugged, then grimaced from pain.

"Oh, it's just… I was thinking whether we are legendary heroes now or just, you know… fools of legendary proportions. All of us in the outer settlement — the Castle too, I guess — heard the stories about the incredible exploits of the first cohort hundreds of times. Killing a

Spire Messenger who made its nest in the throne room, and all that.

But I never once thought that I would actually do something that impossible as well."

She grew silent, and then added:

"It's weird."

Sunny sort of understood her feelings. However, he wasn't going to admit it. He didn't want his name to ever appear in the same sentence as the word "hero". After everything he had experienced, Sunny had become allergic to it.

He sighed.

"You do know how one becomes a mythical hero, right? It's really easy, you just have to do something outlandish and then die. The death part is the key, actually. So I would rather not be a hero, ever."

With that, he stood up and tiredly dismissed his battle Memories and the Stone Saint. Since only Cassie and he were unscathed, it fell to them to help everyone treat their wounds.

Well, in this case, they just had to make sure that no one died before Neph summoned her flames and healed everyone. Sunny wasn't sure that she'll be able to remain conscious after that, though.

Walking over to their leader, he sat down, looked at her, and then asked:

"...Are you stupid? Why did you do that?"

She glanced at him with her usual indifferent expression, straightened her back, and said:

"What do you mean?"

Sunny sighed.

"Why did you get between me and the Messenger? Look at the state you're in."

She looked at him, then shrugged with one shoulder.

"I can heal myself, remember? You can't."

He shook his head.

"I also remember that my armor is three whole tiers above yours. Chances are, I wouldn't even be wounded that terribly."

Nephis was silent for a bit. Then, she simply said:

"...Too risky."

Sunny couldn't help but laugh.

"Gods! I just don't get you. I really don't. You are so morbidly cunning sometimes, but other times, you are so stupidly naive. It doesn't make any sense."

Changing Star did not respond for a long time and just stared at him. When she responded, her tone was as flat as usual:

"Right back at you."

Chapter-261: Moonlight Shard

Some time later, Sunny found the time to dive into the Soul Sea and take a look at the new Memory he had gotten.

It was a heavy round shield forged from dull, lusterless, dark steel. Inside of it, visible only to him, a complex weave of ethereal strings shone with stark radiance.

Memory: [Dusk Shard].

Memory Rank: Ascended.

Memory Tier: II.

Memory Type: Weapon.

Memory Description: [Forged from a shard of a fallen star, this shield contains the weight of the heavens. Depending on the heart of its wielder, it can be light as a feather or heavy as regret.]

Memory Enchantments: [Indomitable].

Enchantment Description: [Following the will of its master, the Dusk Shard can change its weight.]

Sunny frowned.

This enchantment… at first glance, it seemed very unassuming. People usually thought about the weight of their weapons only when they considered how much endurance they would need to wield them. In that regard, the lighter the weapon was, the better — a light weapon could allow a person to fight longer without growing tired, which often meant the difference between victory and defeat.

However, things changed when it came to the Awakened, who often possessed inhuman strength and endurance. Light weapons had their

role to play, but more often than not, what you really needed was force. And the more mass something had, the more force it could produce.

In the past, Sunny had only considered shields as a defensive tool. But after watching Effie and Stone Saint use them in battle, he realized that in the hands of a trained warrior, a shield could be as destructive and deadly as a sword. Sometimes much more so.

Just imagining Effie bashing someone with a shield that weighed a few hundred kilograms sent shivers running down his spine. Not to mention that the weight could be changed on the fly, making it light to maneuver faster, then turning it into an improvised siege ram at the right moment.

But even in terms of pure defense, a shield that could be turned into a literal wall was priceless. He could see a monster such as the Spire Messenger colliding with it… and simply bouncing off in the chorus of shattering bones.

...Maybe.

Granted, Sunny never trained with a shield, and the sword he used demanded two hands to be wielded properly. But where there was a will, there would be a way.

With a slight smile, Sunny summoned the Dusk Shard. The sparks of light appeared in a whirlwind around his arm. A few long seconds later, the silhouette of a large round shield weaved itself into reality. After a few more seconds, and the Memory was fully formed.

'How ni… oh crap!'

With a surprised yelp, Sunny staggered and toppled over. Luckily, he fell on top of the dull iron shield — otherwise, he might have been crushed under its weight.

'This... is so heavy!'

The damn thing was heavier than he had ever expected. In fact, it was probably too heavy for him to even lift, let alone carry around.

The members of the cohort glanced at Sunny, who was struggling to stand up, with perplexed expressions.

Gritting his teeth, Sunny rose to one knee and awkwardly tried to lift the shield off the ground. However, no matter how hard he tried, he only managed to drag it by a few centimeters.

"Curses!"

'Alright, I admit it. It's too damn heavy! Let's reduce the weight a little…'

But a few seconds later, his face froze.

'...This can't be. No way!'

However, the truth was hard to deny.

He... couldn't change the Dusk Shard's weight at all.

The enchantment that was supposed to allow Sunny to do that was there, but it required him to actively manipulate the soul essence — shadow essence, in his case — to access it.

The most powerful enchantments were all like that. And the higher a Memory rank, the more probable it was for the enchantments it possessed to be really powerful.

The problem was that Sleepers had no way to control and manipulate their soul essence.

Sunny didn't know whether to laugh or cry. What were the chances of him coming to possess not one, not two, but three whole Ascended Memories… only to find out that two of them were completely unusable, while the third one required him to somehow become a master marksman to avoid dying from blood loss?

'Damn it! Damn it all! But especially damn that damned Fated attribute!'

While Sunny was grinding his teeth in outrage, Effie approached him and glanced down from her considerable height. Then, she leaned

forward, took the Dusk Shard by the rim, and lifted it — along with Sunny — from the ground, seemingly without too much strain.

"That's it, then? The Memory you got from the pale bastard?"

Finally standing up with the help of the huntress, he stared at her for a long time, his expression unreadable. Then, he suddenly smiled:

"Yes. By the way, Effie. We're friends, aren't we? See, I couldn't help but notice that your shield Memory was destroyed in that last fight. How about…"

She rolled her eyes.

"Wait, don't tell me... Sunny's Shady Emporium is open for business again?"

He blinked a couple of times, then grinned:

"Why yes! How did you know?"

The huntress glanced down at the heavy shield, squinted, and said in a cautious tone:

"Well… what do you want in exchange?"

Sunny thought for a bit.

"That bottomless bag of yours. And two other Awakened Memories."

Before Effie could come to a decision, though, Nephis interrupted their conversation. Coming closer, she glanced at the huntress first, then at Sunny, and finally at the shield.

Finally, she asked:

"How about giving it to Effie in exchange for another Ascended Memory? One more suited to your technique. "

Sunny dismissed the Dusk Shard and hesitated for a bit, looking at Changing Star with doubt. Was this her ploy to get the Shard Memory from him?

If she had an Ascended Memory all this time, why had she been hiding it? And where could she have gotten one, to begin with?

After a while, he said:

"I don't know. Show me the Memory, and then we'll decide."

Nephis silently stepped closer and took his hand. Then, a spark of energy traveled from her body to his.

The Spell whispered:

[You have received a Memory.]

Throwing a dubious glance at Nephis, Sunny summoned the runes and found the name of the Memory he had received. His shadow tilted its head, surprised.

Shimmering in the air in front of him, a string of runes read:

Memory: [Moonlight Shard].

Chapter-262: Path to Damnation

'Another Shard Memory?'

Sunny raised an eyebrow, glanced at Nephis, and turned back to the runes. His eyes glistened.

Memory: [Moonlight Shard].

Memory Rank: Ascended.

Memory Tier: I.

Memory Type: Weapon.

Memory Description: [When the stars were extinguished and fell, a lonely moon remained in the empty sky. With no sun to shine upon it, the moon grew dim, withered, and died. As the last remnants of moonlight were devoured by darkness, one small shard was forged into this subtle blade.]

Memory Enchantments: [Unseen].

Enchantment Description: [Forged from moonlight, this blade appears in the hand of its wielder without delay.]

Sunny's pupils widened slightly. With a tense frown, he summoned the Moonlight Shard.

A graceful dagger with a long and slender blade appeared in his hand. It tapered to a needle-like point and had a simple cross-guard, with a handle made from glossy black wood. The most striking feature of the dagger was that it seemed to be forged out of clear, misty glass. That glass, however, appeared to be as strong as steel… and much, much sharper.

In the darkness of the underground cavern, the ghostly stiletto was

nearly invisible.

What really stunned Sunny, though, was not its look or its rank, but the fact that the moonlight blade had appeared in his had instantaneously. There had been no sparks of light, no process of weaving itself into existence from nothingness. The dagger was simply suddenly there, as if it had always been that way.

This… this was an incredible enchantment. It might not have seemed that powerful, but Sunny instantly understood that there was a lot more to this simple trait than most people would assume.

Once summoned, Memories took time to form. The Dusk Shard had weaved itself into existence in about six to eight seconds. But even if it was just a single second, like the time it took Neph's silver sword to appear, the process was still not instantaneous. What's more, the appearance of a Memory was telegraphed in advance by the dancing sparks of light.

In short, it was very hard to take the enemy by surprise by suddenly summoning a Memory. A skilled opponent would always have enough time to notice it and react accordingly — unless they were lured into a cunning trap by a sword savant like Changing Star. But even then, it wasn't easy to plan and execute such a move.

Yet all of that didn't apply to the Moonlight Shard. The slender blade of the ghostly dagger could appear out of nowhere in an instant and immediately strike at the target.

'...What an insidious little thing.'

It was uniquely suited to Sunny's preferred method of engaging the enemy, indeed. He liked to strike from the shadows and kill with one strike. With the ghostly blade in his arsenal, though, he would not even have to hide in the darkness in order to deliver an unexpected and deadly blow.

No one would see it coming.

Not to mention that it was an Ascended Memory. Armed with the Moonlight Shard, Sunny would finally be able to wound and kill

Fallen creatures — even without the miraculous enhancement of the Crown of Dawn.

His own shadow would be more than enough.

Granted, he would have to get really close and personal to a monster in order to use the dagger. But still, at least with it, he stood a chance.

Suppressing a satisfied smile from appearing on his lips, Sunny turned to Nephis and asked in an incredulous tone:

"Where did you get this thing?"

She lingered for a few moments, then said:

"North of the Dark City."

Sunny nodded. That made sense. There was another red cross on her map, about a week's worth of traveling time north of the ruins. It was drawn near a symbol resembling a grotesque, misshapen skull.

Changing Star had indeed been busy in the three months that he had spent hunting monsters on the dark streets of the cursed city.

Now, five of the Shard Memories were accounted for: Dawn Shard, Zenith Shard, Dusk Shard, Midnight Shard, and Moonlight Shard. Only two remained.

Sunny wondered which statue they were tied to, and whether someone out there already held them in their hands.

…It didn't matter that much for now, though.

With a sigh, he dismissed the ghostly dagger and said:

"I have to warn you that the enchantment on that shield requires an Awakened to activate it. It is supposed to be able to change its weight and mass freely, but actually, it's just stuck being stupidly heavy."

Nephis glanced at Effie, who just shrugged.

"I'm fine with it as is."

Sunny finally allowed himself to smile.

"...Ah, that's great then. We have a deal."

***

In the end, they had to spend a couple of days in the vast underground cavern. Nephis had to recover from her ghastly wound and the strain of healing the rest of the cohort, while all of them had not liked the idea of venturing back into the mist with their Memories damaged.

Eventually, though, they were ready to head back.

Sunny used this short moment of respite to rest and practice Shadow Dance, slowly moving toward his goal of mastering its first step.

He knew that there was nothing but bloodshed ahead of them. First, they would have to fight their way through the untold horrors of the Labyrinth. And once they reached the Dark City…

The last act of this messed-up play would begin.

Looking back, he couldn't believe how far he had come in these past eight months.

When Sunny arrived on the Forgotten Shore, he was weak and inexperienced.

His first fight against a single carapace scavenger almost cost him his life.

And now, here he was, standing near the corpse of a Fallen Monster he had killed with his own two hands.

From barely killing a single carapace scavenger, to almost losing his life in a fight against a carapace centurion, to summoning a horror of the depths and finishing off the Carapace Demon.

From entering the Dark City not knowing anything about it to

hunting down dozens of Nightmare Creatures on its cursed streets, to fighting against a horde of undead monsters in the catacombs beneath it.

From venturing back into the Labyrinth of his own free will and waging war against the tribe of monstrous spiders to riding on the shoulder of an ancient giant and battling Fallen abominations and hordes of Awakened creatures.

From finding a nameless grave in the foothills of the Hollow Mountains to witnessing the last resting place of the First Lord in their depths.

He had lived through so much, endured so much, and accomplished so much.

Of course, there had not been only victories. He had tasted defeat, too... a lot of it. Both in battle and in his tentative attempts to build human relationships with other prisoners of this desolate hell.

He had experienced pain, sorrow, and despair.

...And he was going to taste even more of it soon.

Turning his head slightly, Sunny looked at his companions. Nephis, Cassie, Kai, Effie, and Caster were busy with final preparations for their long return journey.

How many of them would be alive by the end of all of this?

Closing his eyes, he sighed.

It was not going to be easy to survive the finale.

But Sunny was determined to show the rest of the world what he was really made of.

He was going to win. He was going to be the last one standing.

No matter what he had to do.

…Even if doing it would break him.

Chapter-263: The Beginning of the End

Three months later, a group of six battered humans appeared from the sea of crimson coral and approached a magnificent white arch. Moving with the precision of experienced predators, they swiftly slaughtered a few transient creatures that hid in the deep shadow cast by the ancient structure, stripped them down for meat, and swiftly climbed up.

Against all odds, the cohort had survived the journey back to the Dark City.

…If only barely.

Looking north from the top of the marble arch, Sunny saw the distant grey wall. His gaze lingered on it, full of exhaustion, triumph, and dark apprehension.

Finally, they had returned.

The past three months had been an endless bloody nightmare, with countless horrors and battles leaving their marks on him. And yet, they had also been an anvil against which he was tested, tempered, and made stronger as the result.

Sunny didn't have a mirror, but was sure that his appearance changed a lot. He could tell just by looking at other members of the cohort.

Changing Star's white armor was now covered by numerous scratches and tears that even the restorative effect of the Soul Sea couldn't heal. Her silver hair was longer, reaching to the middle of her back. The ivory face of their leader had grown thin, with dark circles visible under her striking, burning grey eyes.

Caster changed even more. The neat and dignified young scion was nowhere to be seen: instead, a man with disheveled hair and a short scruffy beard stood in his place, his face dark and grim. Sometimes, Sunny thought that he could even see a grey hair or two in his luscious mane.

Kai was still beautiful and elegant, but most of his charm was hidden under layers and layers of dirt, dust, and dried blood. The stylish armor he had worn was now long gone, destroyed in one of the vicious battles they had fought, and replaced by a rather unflattering garment that seemed to be woven out of bluish seaweed.

The archer also wielded a new bow, this one long and powerful, fashioned out of two curved horns that had belonged to a creature that Sunny would rather not think about. Suffice it to say, this Memory was of the fifth tier and truly deadly.

Effie was much the same, except for the fact that she had become even leaner, her robust musculature not covered even by a gram of fat. The huntress wielded two Shard Memories, both responsible for sending dozens upon dozens of Nightmare Creature to their deaths. Her archaic bronze armor was dented all over, but somehow still held together

Cassie was the youngest of them, so the changes that had happened to her were perhaps the most pronounced. By now, she had lost most of her childish softness and had turned into a beautiful young woman that looked to be on the cusp of adulthood. She had three Echoes tied to her core now, one given to her by Nephis, the other one by Kai.

With the help of her Echoes and the Dark Wing, Cassie was now able to move and participate in battles almost as if she was not blind.

…Almost.

And then there was Sunny himself. He was perhaps even more beaten and battered than the rest of them, the Puppeteer's Shroud almost coming apart at the seams. His hair was long, messy, and in desperate need of a good wash.

Sadly, his skin was still as pale as that of a corpse. He was also

unable to grow even a bit of scruff, let alone a real beard.

But, oh well… why care about the little things?

Summoning the runes, Sunny found a particular cluster and glanced at it.

The runes shimmered in the twilight of the approaching night.

Shadow Fragments: [938/1000].

A dark smile appeared on his lips.

'Almost.'

***

In the past three months, Sunny had participated in countless battles. His main responsibility was that of a scout, and as such, he was not a part of the cohort's main strike force. But even then, he had faced and slain more than a hundred Nightmare Creatures.

Closer to two hundred, in fact.

Among them were beasts, monsters, as well as a few demons and even a devil or two. Sunny absorbed the remnants of their shadows and used his share of the soul shards to trade for Memories with other members of the cohort, which he then fed to the Stone Saint.

And now, he was so close to reaching full saturation of his Shadow Core.

His prowess and physique were considerably enhanced, too. Somewhere along the way, Sunny had crossed the line of humanly possible and was now firmly in the realm of inhuman ability. He was faster, stronger, and more enduring than any mundane human could ever hope to be.

His shadow had grown much more potent, too, since its enhancement increased proportionally to his own power.

…Or was it the other way around?

In any case, Sunny felt that when the shadow was wrapped around his body, he was now almost at the level of an actual Awakened. Very few Sleepers on the Forgotten Shore could challenge him in terms of raw power.

Of course, all of them had deadly Aspect Abilities of their own.

…And several of the most deadly Sleepers among them were all right here, with him, setting up camp and getting ready to cook him food.

Sunny wasn't sure, but guessed that Effie and Caster had already fully saturated their Soul Cores, beating him to it — the huntress because of the years she had spent hunting monsters on the streets of the Dark City, and the Legacy because of the soul shards his clan must have provided him before his first journey into the Dream Realm.

Nephis… Sunny wasn't sure. Logic dictated that she should have reached the point of saturation before Sunny did, but he still saw her absorbing shards after each battle. So either she did not, or her Aspect had other uses for the excess soul essence.

Or she was just putting on an expensive show.

Kai and Cassie were behind him in terms of the amount of accumulated essence, but not by much. Each of them was now a powerhouse, just like the rest of the cohort.

Looking at the people busying themselves with mundane tasks of setting up the camp, Sunny inhaled deeply and smiled.

"Ah. Aren't we a sight to behold?"

Chapter-264: First Things First

They truly were.

When leaving the Dark City behind, Sunny had known how powerful the members of the cohort were. However, he had not quite realized just how well-rounded and perfectly suited to face various challenges presented by the Labyrinth their group was.

With Nephis, Effie and Caster leading the charge, most Nightmare Creatures populating the forest of crimson coral had little chance to survive, not with the Crown of Dawn pouring raw power into the armor and weapons of the cohort, at least. Each of the three was a deadly and versatile fighter, with their own unique approach to combat and strengths that complemented each other.

With the three slayers holding off the opponents while being supported by Kai from above, very few things could stand in their way.

Night himself had turned out to be an astonishingly deadly presence on the battlefield, as well. With the Blood Arrow providing him with a conditionally endless supply of arrows, he could just stay in the air, out of reach of the abominations that had no way to attack at range — which was most of them — and pick them out with well-aimed shots.

With the addition of the formidable horn bow, the distance at which he could hit the target had increased tremendously, allowing him to eliminate some of the enemies long before they had gotten close enough to the cohort for an effective attack. His opening salvo had made a lot of battles much less problematic.

Of course, Kai couldn't fly above the Labyrinth with impunity. The grey sky was full of danger, too, and by separating himself from his companions, he risked being attacked and torn apart by the

abominations that populated it. He had to maintain a fragile balance.

But the flying Nightmare Creatures were a threat to the cohort regardless of whether or not the charming archer rose into the air or not. Actually, this was the type of enemy they were equipped to fight the least. That's why Kai's ability to fly had turned out to be priceless.

Especially because he was usually able to fly faster or at least maneuver better than most of the creatures that dwelled in the sky. More than once, they had survived only because the archer was able to draw the fury of the aerial abominations and dodge their attack long enough to either fell them with a perfectly aimed arrow or give his companions a chance to join the fight.

Sunny and Cassie usually protected the rear of the cohort to prevent anything from attacking their companions from the back — which happened more often than one would hope.

With the help of the Stone Saint and the Quiet Dancer, and later the other two Echoes belonging to the blind girl, they were able to hold off anything until the main force was done with their share of the opponents and joined the fray.

That was not to say that their role in the cohort was less important.

If anything, Sunny was convinced that what they did was more vital to the survival of each member of the cohort than what the fighters were doing.

It was true that, with the help of the Dawn Shard, the cohort was well equipped to handle most monsters of the Labyrinth. What they truly had to fear were the creatures that defied all logic, the perils that the human mind could not even comprehend, and the Labyrinth itself — as well as the dark waters of the cursed sea and the ancient horrors that dwelled beneath them.

That was what Sunny and Cassie had to protect the group from.

As Sunny absorbed more and more shadow fragments, the range at which he could control his shadow grew exponentially. By now, the shadow could move almost as far as a whole kilometer ahead of the

cohort, scouting for any potential threat and giving them plenty of time to decide if they wanted to fight or change course and avoid the danger entirely.

If anything, it had become a little feral and now preferred to wander around aimlessly and far away, returning to Sunny only when specifically commanded to do so.

But regardless of that, the value of being able to see and identify their enemies in advance was impossible to overestimate. It was just too valuable. In battle, the tiniest advantage could decide the difference between life and death, and the advantages of knowledge and the first strike were possibly the most important.

However, there were things on the Forgotten Shore that even Sunny could not see, predict, or escape from.

That was where Cassie's affinity to revelations and miraculous intuition came into play. She was responsible for preventing the cohort from stumbling into anything that would destroy their very souls before anyone could even understand what was happening, or something that simply could not be defeated.

If not for Cassie, a sudden storm or a creature akin to the Soul Devourer — or something even more terrifying — would have ended their lives long before they returned back to the Dark City.

But even with all that, every day in the Labyrinth brought them to the very verge of death. No matter how strong, well-rounded, and well-equipped the cohort was, the nightmares of the Forgotten Shore were always more powerful, unpredictable, and bizarre, making any and all preparations useless.

In the end, the only reason that none of them had died from grievous wounds, sickness, or infection was because of Changing Star's healing flames.

In the three months that they had spent traveling through the Labyrinth, Sunny fully understood why healers were so sought after among the Awakened. He knew it before, in theory, but only after being subjected to the daily terror of their journey had he realized

how life-changing — literally — the presence of a healer in the cohort truly was.

And so, just like that, they had done the unthinkable and managed to travel all the way from the edges of the Forgotten Shore back to its center — thanks to their power and resolve, their foresight, their strength, and their ability to rely on and help each other.

As well as, in large part, pure dumb luck.

And now that they were about to return to the cursed haven of the Dark City, their luck was about to be tested as it had never been tested before.

…But that was for later.

First, the members of the cohort had to fulfill their obligation to Sunny.

He had joined this expedition on a certain condition, after all.

Glancing once again at the distant grey wall, Sunny clenched his fists. The corner of his mouth curled up in a vicious grin.

'...Wait a bit more, bastard. Your day of reckoning is coming.'

In two days, they were going to kill the Black Knight.

Chapter-265: Hateful Shadow

Turning away from the distant wall of the Dark City, Sunny closed his eyes, inhaled deeply, and let go of his anger.

He had to keep his head cool, for now. Killing a Fallen Devil was not going to be an easy task. It might even turn out to be his undoing.

...But he was determined to see it done. The debt of blood he owed that creature had to be repaid, no matter what.

Walking over to the fire, Sunny sat down and tried to remember the details of their previous stay on this old, weathered marble arch. What a fun couple of days that had been.

Rather pleasing on the eye, too...

His shadow shook its head dejectedly and turned away.

Soon, Nephis handed him his share of the food. Her culinary skills had improved a lot during these months — despite the fact that there had not been a large variety of ingredients at their disposal. Still, being able to turn the most repulsive of monsters into a delicious meal was something that not everyone was capable of.

'This should be a separate course at the Academy.'

Teacher Julius had taught him how to consume various things in the Dream Realm without ending up poisoned to death, but he had neglected to go in-depth on how to actually make them taste good.

Sinking his teeth into a juicy piece of meat, Sunny forgot about his troubles for a bit and simply enjoyed this rare moment of bliss. Disposing of the meat, he smiled in satisfaction and wiped his hands on the soft fabric of the Puppeteer's Shroud. Then, he glanced at Nephis and asked:

"We should be able to reach the city tomorrow, yes?"

She gave him a nod.

"...If nothing happens."

Sunny thought for a bit, then said in a curious tone:

"Do you think Gunlaug knows that we are coming back?"

Nephis thought for a few moments before replying. Her voice was calm and indifferent.

"Definitely."

Sunny sighed. This was his conclusion as well: back when he had first entered the Bright Castle, he had learned from Caster about a certain Artisan that could track the general location of anyone a person had ever met. This was how Caster knew how many Sleepers of their crop had been sent to the Forgotten Shore.

Even if Gunlaug possessed no other method to learn of their approach, all he had to do was ask that woman.

Sunny shifted a little and asked:

"Should we expect a welcoming party?"

Changing Star shook her head.

"I don't think so. There's no need for him to do anything. Gunlaug knows that we will come to him of our own free will… simply because there's nowhere else for us to go."

She fell silent for a while, and then added:

"But most of all, this has never been about killing me or my people. It was always about destroying the ideas I represent. What's the point of crushing me if no one is there to see it? Gunlaug won't do anything without an audience. He had sent Harus to stop us from escaping the stage, but now that we are back on it, there is no need for him to rush the inevitable."

Everyone listened to the conversation with dark expressions. Sunny glanced at them, hesitated for a bit, and asked:

"Are you confident that you can defeat him?"

Nephis stared at the fire. After a while, she simply said:

"Yes."

Hearing that, Sunny smiled sweetly.

"Well, good for you, but I am not. So let's finish our deal before the lot of you get killed by that maniac. Alright?"

A corner of Neph's mouth curled upward.

"You are talking about the Fallen Devil?"

He nodded.

"Yes. The bastard. You promised to help me kill him, remember?"

Meanwhile, Kai was looking at him with a complicated expression. Finally, not able to hold back, he asked:

"Sunny… are you really not going to join us? Don't… don't you see that we only have one chance to escape this place? Not to mention all the lives we can save!"

Sunny shrugged. To be honest, he wasn't entirely sure on that point himself. On one hand, he had no desire of helping Nephis achieve her insane goal. On the other hand, things that she had set in motion were going to happen with or without him.

What was he going to do, hide in his cathedral and wait until there was no one else left alive on the Forgotten Shore?

Some fate that would be…

"Maybe I'll join you, and maybe I won't. Who knows what will happen?"

He fell silent and cast a sideways glance at Cassie.

Actually, at least three people here knew what would happen… more or less.

'It's hard to escape fate.'

"That's not the point though, is it? The point is that you should conclude our deal first and do whatever it is you wish to do later..."

Changing Star faced the two of them and calmly ended that conversation:

"Sure. No problem. We'll go to the cathedral first. A deal is a deal, after all."

Sunny smiled with satisfaction.

Nephis glanced at him and added:

"But, Sunny… how exactly are we supposed to kill a Fallen Devil?"

His smile widened.

"Oh! I'm glad that you asked…"

***

Sunny had been making plans on how exactly to kill the Black Knight for more than half a year now. Prior to leaving the Dark City, he had spent two entire months observing the terrifying fiend and trying to learn everything there was to know about him.

Needless to say, the task of slaying a creature that powerful was not going to be trivial. In fact, it was going to be the hardest battle they had fought yet.

It almost seemed impossible.

But was it, really?

The fight against the Spire Messenger, who had turned out to be a Fallen Monster, nearly cost several members of the cohort their lives. They had barely been able to hold off against the creature of its class,

and a devil was ten times more dreadful.

However, there was a big difference between the Messenger they had faced and the Black Knight.

That difference was, basically, very simple.

It was that Sunny did not hate the Messenger with all his dark, vindictive heart.

And now, that hate was going to tip the scales in their favor.

Chapter-266: The Devil You Know

At the core of it, things were indeed rather simple. Sunny hated the Black Knight enough to do his due diligence and thus spent an incredible amount of time studying it. He was so motivated to kill the creature that had hurt him that he had even gone so far as to settle in the same old cathedral as the devil.

As a result, Sunny had become a singular expert on everything having to do with the Black Knight. He knew his strengths, he knew his weaknesses, the patterns of his behavior…

And, most importantly, he knew what type of unnatural powers the devil possessed.

Unlike Nightmare Creatures of lower ranks, devils had access to bizarre and harrowing powers that were akin to the Aspect Abilities of the Awakened. That was what made them so dangerous, and that was why the fact that Sunny had learned the Black Knight's power was so vital.

Unlike the Spire Messenger, whom they had to fight blind, the cohort was going to go into battle with the Fallen Devil fully aware of what they would face. As such, they could plan, come up with strategies, and make preparations.

Knowing your enemy was half the victory.

The second half was knowing yourself.

The smile disappeared from Sunny's face. Leaning forward, he said:

"The Black Knight is truly a living nightmare. He is as strong, fast, and indestructible as you would imagine a Fallen Devil to be. I've

seen countless creatures fall to his sword — no matter their shape, size, rank, or class. He is just too powerful."

Effie giggled.

"You're not really making your case, Sunny. You know that, right?"

He glanced at her and grinned.

"That's not even the worst part. What really makes him an incarnation of death is not his astonishing might, but the darkness that lives in the grand hall of the cathedral and seems to obey him. When wrapped in that darkness, the Black Knight can move fast, unseen, and without making a single sound. His physical traits are vastly enhanced, turning him into an unstoppable engine of slaughter."

Sunny grimaced.

"What's more, any damage done to him is instantly repaired as long as he is surrounded by the darkness. Inside of it, he is basically immortal."

The members of the cohort glanced at each other with dubious expressions. Only Changing Star remained indifferent.

A tentative smile appeared on Sunny's face. Turning to Nephis, he said:

"But that is where you come in, Neph. With your radiant light, that darkness will vanish. Your flames can strip the bastard of his greatest weapon. Without his dark power, the Black Knight is nothing more than a powerful abomination. He will be only slightly more dangerous than a demon of the same rank."

Caster stared at him and said, his voice flat:

"You say it as though a Fallen Demon is an easy enemy to face."

Sunny shook his head.

"No, I am not saying that. I fully understand how hard that fight will

be. In fact, I understand it better than any of you. The truth of the matter is that even with the Dawn Shard, our weapons won't be able to wound him. Not because his flesh is too tough, but because he is covered in heavy armor from head to toe. I am not even sure that there is any flesh beneath it, to be honest.

There is only one chink in his armor, and that is the visor of the helmet."

The Black Knight had two burning red embers instead of eyes, so Sunny didn't even know if the bastard had a face.

Kai shifted a little and said with uncertainty:

"So the only way to kill him is to hit the crack of the visor? I am… I am not sure that this is possible. On a fixed target, sure. But on a moving one, especially one that fast and deadly… I can't promise that I'll manage that."

The others nodded, expressing their agreement.

Sunny smiled.

"Ah, yes. That would indeed be tough. Luckily, we don't have to."

He paused for a moment, and then revealed the secret that had taken him a long, long time to uncover:

"The truth is, the visor is a trap. It seems like a weak spot, but it's not. The real weakness of the Black Knight is not even protected by the armor."

A dark expression appeared on his face.

"It's his sword."

Indeed, after observing the devil for months, Sunny had come to the conclusion that the secret to destroying the damned thing hid not in finding a way to pierce the bastard's armor, but in destroying his terrifying greatsword.

By watching the Black Knight fight against countless Nightmare

Creatures, Sunny had been able to notice a curious pattern. Just like the members of the cohort, the abominations who wandered into the cathedral tended to instinctively go for the eyes of its guardian. But the bastard didn't care about those attacks at all.

He did, however, tend to protect his sword against most powerful blows, going so far as to receive them with his body instead of blocking or deflecting them with the obliterating black blade. As if wary of any damage being done to it.

By focusing on this pattern, Sunny had confirmed that the sword was indeed the only thing that the Fallen Devil seemed to be reluctant to put in harm's way.

It was his true weakness.

Nephis tilted her head slightly and echoed his words:

"...His sword?"

Sunny nodded.

"Yes. If we want to kill the Black Knight, we will have to destroy his greatsword. That is the only way."

Effie blinked a couple of times, then glared at him in outrage.

"Is that what you call not being protected by the armor? Of course it's not protected by the armor! Because it's even tougher than the armor, you doofus!"

She shook her head.

"How are we supposed to break a sword fit to be wielded by a Fallen Devil? Huh?"

Sunny smiled.

"Oh, you don't have to. In fact, I insist that you don't. You are there to help me, but no one can kill that bastard except for me. No one, you understand? So, your task will be to hold that fiend off. Leave the sword to me."

The huntress scoffed.

"That's not really an answer. If none of us is strong enough to even come close to breaking such a powerful armament, how are you going to destroy it?"

Sunny stared at her for a bit, then shrugged.

"I am not going to destroy it. Do I look like someone who can destroy it? No, I don't. And I can't."

A dark grin appeared on his lips.

"...But the Stone Saint? I am willing to bet that she can."

She was able to slaughter two Fallen Beasts before even becoming his Shadow. Now that Sunny's own shadow had grown strong with almost a thousand fragments fueling it with power, there were very few things in the Dark City that the Saint couldn't destroy with its help.

So yes, he was willing to bet that she would be able to break the sword of the Black Knight.

In fact, he was going to bet his life on it.

Chapter-267: Let There Be Light

Two days later, they entered the Dark City once again.

Nephis was right — no one from the Castle was there to ambush them. Gunlaug seemed to be content letting them come to him instead, so his Hunters and the dreadful hunchback were nowhere to be seen.

Just as well.

The cohort scaled the impregnable grey wall late in the evening and spent the night in one of its towers — almost like how Sunny, Neph, and Cassie had done all that time ago.

When the morning came, they headed toward the ruined cathedral.

The ruined streets of the cursed city surrounded them once more. After months spent in the Labyrinth, their monotone colors seemed strange and bizarre. There was nothing but dark stone and dust around, with rare islands of crimson leaves and moss growing through the rubble.

And swarms of terrifying Fallen Creatures, of course.

…It was nice to be home.

Sunny caught himself thinking that and blinked. He had never thought that one day he would feel sentimental about returning to this cursed, ancient prison. And yet, there was a strange feeling of comfort deep in his heart now. It had been there ever since they had crested the city wall.

'What weird creatures we humans are. Truly, there is nothing we can't get used to.'

Glancing at his companions, he noticed that they were feeling the same way — especially Effie, who had spent years surviving, hunting, and even thriving on the streets of the Dark City.

She even called it a paradise once.

…The only kind that humans deserved.

Sunny sighed. Regardless of the strange ideas the huntress had, he believed that humans weren't meant to live in a paradise.

If they were to ever find one, they would quickly turn it into hell.

….Just like what the humans trapped on the Forgotten Shore were doing right now.

***

Soon, the ruins of the magnificent cathedral were in front of them. The members of the cohort stopped some distance away, looking at the ancient temple with dark expressions. The journey through the Dark City had turned out to be uneventful thanks to Effie's masterful guidance and the shadow scouting ahead to help her learn of any dangers ahead of time.

But the real danger hid at the end of the path, and now, they had reached it.

Sunny had spent the last two days teaching the rest of the group everything that he knew about how the Black Devil fought, what his habits were, and how they had to approach the upcoming battle. They were as ready as they were ever going to be.

Turning to them, he lingered for a few moments, and then said:

"...Remember — I must be the one to deal the final blow. It is very important to me."

Looking at him with a complicated expression, Kai sighed.

"Why are you so obsessed with killing this devil, Sunny? Won't it be better to leave that creature be? I just don't understand this whole

endeavor."

Sunny smiled.

"Have you ever been gutted, Kai? And I don't mean emotionally. I mean literally, with a sharp piece of metal?

The charming archer shivered.

"Uh… no. Were you?"

The smile disappeared from Sunny's face.

"Yes. I was. That bastard over there cut me open with his big sharp sword and left me bleeding to death in a ditch. So… it's only fair that I do something similar to him, is it not? I don't know how it works with you citizen folks, but out in the outskirts, you don't let things like that go. Simple as that."

The day you let a person who hurt you walk free was the day you announced to the world that anyone could stomp on you with impunity. After that, it was a short road to the grave… or worse.

So people in the outskirts were very serious about their grudges.

Granted, the Black Knight was not really a person. But the same principle applied.

Kai stared at him with a complicated expression, then asked in a strange voice:

"Really? Then… how did you survive?"

Sunny turned away and moved his shoulders slightly.

"A combination of good Attributes and powerful Memories. That's how I survived. Well… most of me did."

With that, he shook his head and gritted his teeth in anger.

"Enough talk. You all know the plan… so let's get it over with."

Today, Sunny was going to reach the pinnacle of his hunter career.

He was going to hunt the devil.

***

Inside the tenebrous grand hall of the majestic cathedral, darkness reigned unopposed. It drowned the vast hall, clinging to its walls and tall columns. The rare beams of light falling through the narrow windows only served to make it seem deeper.

Six humans entered the temple, the light of their lantern Memories failing to pierce the veil of darkness even slightly.

For a moment, there was utter silence. And then, a sudden yell broke it apart:

"Now!"

A tall young woman with silver hair and calm, striking grey eyes raised her sword. Then, a wave of brilliant white light shone from it, reaching far and wide. The darkness was instantly torn apart and obliterated, vanishing into the deepest, darkest corners of the cathedral.

…And there, right in front of them, a giant clad in black steel armor was revealed, his sword already on its way to reap the lives of the unfortunate fools who had dared to desecrate the silence of the ancient temple.

The greatsword he wielded seemed as heavy as the stone pillars that supported the roof of the temple. Falling from above, it looked like a vertical tear in reality that revealed the impenetrable darkness hiding beneath.

What could stop such a monstrous blow?

...Perhaps the shield that contained the weight of the heavens themselves could.

Effie dashed forward, raising the Dusk Shard. The heavy shield received the terrible impact of the devil's unstoppable attack. A deafening sound of steel clashing against steel rolled across the grand hall like a sound shockwave, growing louder as it reflected from the

stone walls.

The shield held.

The floor beneath Effie's feet, however, did not. It cracked and shattered, sending the huntress reeling back. A pained yelp escaped from her lips.

The Black Knight lingered for a moment, seemingly surprised by the obliteration of the darkness that had shrouded him.

However, his hesitation lasted only for a fraction of a second — not nearly enough for the humans to prepare themselves for his next attack.

…And it was already coming.

Without paying any attention to Effie, who was flying back, the devil turned with astonishing swiftness and aimed his sword at Nephis.

But before he could perform his second strike, a massive piece of rubble the size of an adult human suddenly flew through the air and crashed into the armored giant at full speed. All the Black Knight could do was lean forward and meet it with his shoulder.

The boulder exploded into a thousand pieces, leaving the devil unscathed.

The creature that threw it walked through the dust with utter indifference, two ruby flames burning behind the visor of her helmet.

The Stone Saint had arrived to face the Black Knight.

Chapter-268: Clash

The Stone Saint walked toward the Black Knight with stalwart indifference. Her body shone with dark radiance, and there were wisps of ghostly grey fog dancing on her elegant armor. The ruby eyes of the taciturn monster burned with menacing crimson flames.

The darkness that served the devil had been vanquished by Changing Star's incandescent light, but the shadows populating the ancient temple only grew deeper because of it. Now, they were shifting, as if reaching toward the Saint to fall upon her shoulders like a mantle.

Without slowing down, the Shadow raised her shield and hit its rim twice with the edge of her sword, as though challenging the Black Knight to a battle.

With the two creatures finally facing each other, it became even more apparent that there was a mysterious connection between the two of them. Despite the fact that the Black Knight towered above the graceful living statue, their general appearance and the design of their armaments were eerily similar.

It was just that in front of the intricate stonelike armor of the Shadow, the devil's own formidable full plate, which had been masterfully forged from indestructible black steel, seemed almost… crude.

Facing the original masterpiece, he looked like a clumsy imposter.

Sunny knew that his intuition was right when he caught a hint of the same dim, nascent emotion that the Shadow had shown toward the walking colossus.

Despite the fact that the Fallen Devil was vastly more powerful than her and both outclassed and outranked her, witnessing him, the Stone Saint felt nothing but disdain.

Contempt, even.

All of these observations had not taken Sunny more than half a second. In the next moment, both creatures dashed forward and collided in a furious clangor of metal.

The battle had begun!

Now that his core was close to being saturated to the brim by the shadow fragments Sunny had collected from hundreds of Nightmare Creatures — and a few humans — the augmentation provided by the shadow was able to make him powerful enough to almost reach the level of an actual Awakened.

By the same logic, the Stone Saint should have been brought very close to the power level of a Fallen abomination. Sunny even suspected that she was enhanced by the shadow even more than he would be himself. The Shadow and the shadow seemed to intertwine perfectly, almost as if this was the true purpose of the augmenting facet of his Aspect.

The Saint had slaughtered two Fallen Beasts even before becoming a Shadow, although it had been at the cost of her life. What would she be able to do now, reborn and reinforced by the mystical power of his divine Aspect?

…Kill a deadly bastard of a Fallen Devil, hopefully.

But still, the gap between the two of them was just too vast. Even with the help of the shadow, the Stone Saint was clearly not a match for the Black Knight in terms of sheer power.

Luckily, she was not alone.

As the two creatures collided and turned into a whirlwind of steel, the humans joined the fight to support their monster.

Caster appeared at a terrible speed, striking at the giant black sword with his elegant jian. The ghostly green blade slid off the surface of the greatsword without any result, but the impact of his strike managed to slow the Black Knight by a fraction of a second.

That was all the Stone Saint needed to deliver a blow of her own. Closing the distance to the giant fiend in order to turn his size and reach superiority against him, she struck upward at the pommel of the greatsword with her shield. The hands of the Black Knight were thrown above his head, and using that opening, she bulldozed into his abdomen with her shoulder, sending the giant reeling.

The violence of the impact was so fierce that several fractures appeared on the surface of her stonelike pauldron. As the dull metal sound rang across the grand hall, shards of stone flew into the air.

But it was not in vain. The momentary gap in the defense of the devil allowed Nephis to deliver a devastating thrust with her silver longsword.

Enhanced by the annihilating white flame and the miraculous enchantment of the Dawn Shard, the sword hit against the breastplate of the Black Knight's armor…

And broke through, sinking deep into the body of the fiend.

For a moment, everyone froze, stunned at the ease with which they were able to pierce the seemingly impregnable armor of the Fallen Devil. Just a moment before, Caster's jian didn't even leave a scratch on the black steel of the fiend's greatsword…

But then, things took a sharp turn for the worse.

The Black Knight did not seem to care about several inches of incandescent steel penetrating his chest at all. Regaining his balance, he indifferently swiped his sword down, forcing both Nephis and the Stone Saint to stagger back. The black blade hit the marble floor, causing the ground to shake and throwing Neph to the ground.

Before anyone could react, the devil let go of the hilt of his sword with one hand and delivered a shattering backhanded blow to the Shadow. The strength of that strike would have been enough to pulverize any human, but the Stone Saint was made of a far more enduring material than flesh. Still, the living statue was thrown back like a broken doll.

Almost instantly, the Black Knight turned to Nephis once more. The terrifying sword flew into the air, ready to split her apart.

'I was right!'

A savage smile appeared on Sunny's face. Brandishing the Midnight Shard, he dashed forward and screamed:

"...Plan C!"

Plan C was very simple. It was born out of the prediction Sunny had made when discussing how they were going to kill the devil. He had suspected all along that since Neph was a perfect counter to the Black Knight's most dreadful power, he would concentrate all his attention on dealing with her first.

In short, the devil was going to make killing Changing Star his number one priority.

Nephis was indeed a perfect counter against the living darkness, but even better than that…

She was the perfect bait.

Chapter-269: Incarnation of Death

The black blade fell down, missing Nephis only by a hair's breadth. She rolled back and performed an impossible handspring, launching herself into the air from the ground. Landing on the marble floor with an effortless grace of a trained acrobat, Changing Star slid back a few meters and came to a stop some distance away from the devil.

But he was just as fast... no, much faster. The giant was already lunging forward to skewer her on the tip of his terrible greatsword. She shifted slightly, dodging the deadly attack, and dashed forward along the vast length of the black blade. Her sword flashed through the air and impacted against the vambrace of the menacing armor, leaving a deep scratch on its dark surface.

…Everything was happening so fast that other members of the cohort were having trouble joining the fight. The Stone Saint had just landed on the marble floor a moment ago and was currently rising back to her feet. Effie had recovered from receiving the full brunt of the Black Knight's first attack and was rushing forward, but she was still a few meters away.

Kai had drawn his bow, but couldn't send an arrow flying without the risk of hitting one of his companions. With how potent the enchantment of the Blood Arrow was, this was something he could not allow to happen.

Cassie mostly relied on Echoes to fight, and since they were not enhanced by the Dawn Shard, their utility in this battle would not have been high. More than that, they risked being destroyed by a single strike from the devil. As such, she was relegated to holding back for now, and would only join the fight if things really went south.

So for now, it was up to Sunny and Caster to slow the fiend down.

Their only saving grace, and the point that Sunny had explained in detail, was that the terrifying greatsword, while deadly and utterly unstoppable — well, almost — was ultimately an unwieldy weapon.

The Black Knight was strong enough to throw it around as though the giant blade weighed no more than a feather and skilled enough to turn momentum and inertia into useful tools as opposed to obstacles, but he still had to obey the laws of physics. Even more importantly, the damn thing was very long.

Which meant that they had to stick to the Fallen Devil like glue in order to use its long reach against him.

As the steel giant sidestepped and pulled his greatsword into a vicious horizontal swipe aimed at Changing Star, Sunny closed the distance between them and approached the devil from the opposite side. The Midnight Shard flashed, striking at the elbow joint of the plate armor.

All Sunny achieved was leaving a small scratch on it, but he also pushed the Black Knight's hand down and closer to his body a bit, changing the angle of the swipe slightly. At the same time, Caster dove under the terrible blade and suddenly appeared right in front of the devil, thrusting his jian at the steel helmet.

The Black Knight just turned his head slightly, causing the ghostly green blade to slide off the helmet without doing any damage. At the same time, he let go of the sword with one hand and threw his elbow back, almost smashing Sunny's skull in.

…All the while continuing his deadly strike at Nephis.

Nevertheless, their tandem attack helped Changing Star avoid being cut in half. Taking a swift step forward, she raised her own sword and received the blow on its blade. Since she had time to close the distance and was now mere centimeters away from the devil, the part of the greatsword that hit her was close to the cross-guard, and as such, did not carry too much destructive force.

Still, it was enough to send her crashing onto the ground, the sword sliding from her hand.

Even with the three of them fighting together, they couldn't slow the cursed creature for more than a moment.

But then, a moment was all they needed. Because it gave Effie enough time to rejoin the fight.

It also gave Kai the opportunity to take a shot.

A black arrow streaked through the air… and plunged right into the crack of the devil's visor.

Sunny noticed a startled expression on the charming archer's face. He himself was stunned, too: no one had expected Kai to actually hit the bastard right in the only chink in his armor, least of all Kai himself.

The head of the Black Knight was violently jerked backward.

…But in the next moment, Kai staggered and groaned.

'Curse it! Why am I always right?!'

Sunny had anticipated that result, too. He had guessed a long time ago that there was no flesh beneath the menacing black armor. Rather, the armor itself was the Nightmare Creature, or at least the vessel for the evil soul of a powerful revenant. As such, there was no blood for the ghastly arrow to drink. That's why Kai had been affected by the backlash of his Fallen Memory despite hitting his target.

Just in case something like that happened, Sunny had tasked the charming archer with fashioning a few mundane arrows out of splinters of bone that was everywhere on the Forgotten Shore.

So Kai wasn't entirely out of the fight, yet. However, the amount of damage he would be able to do to the terrifying devil was now extremely low.

'Damnation!'

But Sunny had no time to lament this turn of events. The battle was only growing more chaotic and fierce…

Thanks to the incredible precision of Kai's shot, the Black Knight was disoriented for a moment. Effie arrived just at the right time to use it to their advantage. Leaning low, she used the momentum of her lunge and the bone-breaking weight of the Dusk Shard to deliver a devastating blow to the thigh of the steel giant. As another shockwave of sound rolled through the grand hall, the fiend staggered.

But a fraction of a second later, he brought his armored fist down on the mighty huntress, causing her to reel away with a pained scream. The pommel of the black sword lurched forward, catching Caster in the chest despite how fast the proud Legacy was moving. He crumbled to the floor like a broken mannequin.

Lastly, the Black Knight turned his blade to Sunny, causing him to retreat.

The damn bastard was simply unstoppable. None of their attacks had achieved anything except for annoying him a little.

'Not good, not good...'

…Pushing herself off the ground, Nephis looked at the Fallen Devil that towered above her like a bastion of darkness. Her face was pale, and there was blood flowing from her mouth.

What's worse, the silver sword had slid far away and was now out of her reach. The incandescent radiance disappeared from its blade, allowing for the darkness that hid in the corners of the grand call to slowly begin crawling back.

Nothing stood between her and the Black Knight anymore.

Suddenly opening his eyes wide, Sunny glanced into the depths of the cathedral.

And then, a simple scream escaped from his lips:

"Neph! Run!"

Chapter-270: Runaway

As the silver sword was extinguished, Changing Star lingered for a moment. White flames ignited in her eyes, and suddenly, the pristine white breastplate of the Starlight Legion Armor was enveloped in blinding white light.

The darkness that had begun to seep back into the grand hall of the ancient temple reeled away once more. It appeared as though Nephis changed the target of her miraculous Aspect Ability and used her armor as its conduit instead of the sword.

But from the side, it simply looked like there was a furious white star burning in her chest.

…That momentary delay almost cost her her life.

As soon as Sunny's scream echoed through the cathedral, the terrifying black blade came down once again. This time, Nephis seemingly had no chance to escape.

But, somehow, she did.

Pushing herself off the marble floor, she twisted her body and barely avoided the falling guillotine of the Black Knight's greatsword, then swiftly rolled away. The next moment, she was already on her feet.

As the devil lunged forward to crush her, Changing Star did something that no one would ever expect the proud daughter of the Immortal Flame Clan to do.

She turned her back to the enemy… and ran.

From their early days in the Labyrinth, Sunny knew that Nephis could be incredibly fast when she wanted to. And indeed, just a second later, she was already far away. Cursing under his breath, he

followed.

No matter how fast Nephis was, the Black Knight was faster.

The devil was already pursuing his runaway prey, moving with a celerity that seemed strange for a creature of his size, especially one clad in an incredibly heavy suit of steel armor. With each moment, he drew closer and closer to Changing Star, his sword ready to reap her life.

Straining his muscles to their limit, Sunny ran as fast as he could, too, desperately trying to catch up to them. With Effie and Caster temporarily put out of commission and Cassie and Kai sidelined, he was the only one left. He had to make it in time, no matter what.

If he didn't…

'Come on!'

Gritting his teeth, Sunny somehow managed to accelerate even more.

Nephis was already halfway through the grand hall of the cathedral. The statue of the nameless goddess on the far side of it must have appeared in her sight.

It was then when she suddenly stopped and turned around, sliding on the marble floor a few meters because of the momentum. The silver sword had already been dismissed and summoned back from her Soul Sea.

It seemed as though out of desperation, Nephis decided to mount one last, suicidal attack on the swiftly approaching steel giant. Or maybe she had just gone crazy.

But it only seemed that way.

…The corners of Sunny's mouth curled upward.

'That's my girl!'

Plan C was about to come to fruition. Changing Star had performed her role perfectly.

Well, what else did Sunny expect from her?

All that remained was to stall the Black Knight for a few seconds.

The devil descended upon the silver-haired girl in a fury of obliterating black steel. Nephis met him with her usual calm resolve, dodging strike after strike with incredible skill. Just like a lifetime ago, when she had been facing Caster at the dojo of the Academy, she used her understanding and control of the flow of combat to breach the gap in speed between her and her opponent.

She wasn't as much reacting to the deadly blows delivered by the devil as predicting them, moving to evade the strikes of the black greatsword before they could even happen.

Of course, this deadly dance could not last. The tiniest of mistakes would have been her last. And even if she didn't make any, Nephis was not going to be able to keep this level of concentration for long, not to mention the insane toll this fearsome clash took on her stamina and endurance.

But she didn't have to. All she needed to do was to keep the bastard busy for a couple of seconds.

And when those seconds ran out…

A sudden crack of breaking stone resounded in the darkness of the ancient temple.

***

In all the commotion, the Stone Saint had strangely disappeared. After Sunny had confirmed that the Fallen Devil was targeting Nephis above everyone else, their strongest combatant — his Shadow — was nowhere to be seen.

That, of course, was on purpose. She was laying the groundwork for the plan to work while the rest of them kept the Black Knight distracted.

The plan, however, could only happen in a certain spot in the grand hall. That was where Changing Star had to lure the Black Knight in

case he fixated on her. Following the descriptions provided to her by Sunny, she led the devil deeper into the cathedral and stopped just in the right place.

And then, she engaged him in a fierce battle to give the Saint time to close the trap.

…Which she did by taking a running start and crashing with all her weight into one of the tall, magnificent pillars supporting the roof of the cathedral.

This pillar, in particular, was damaged at the base, making it uniquely unstable. Sunny knew every corner of the ruined temple like the palm of his hand, so he knew about this flaw of the pillar as well.

That had been what he based Plan C on.

As Sunny ran, he could see everything that followed in all its majestic brutality.

The breaking of stone resounded in the vast hall of the ancient temple. A net of cracks appeared on the massive, incredibly tall column and quickly spread to a deep gash in its base. Shards of stone flew in every direction, and the column began to topple.

It seemed slow at first. But in fact, it wasn't.

In the center of the hall, the Black Knight paused his relentless onslaught for a moment and turned his head, following the sound of cracking stone.

…He was a second too late.

As Nephis dashed away, the pillar fell on the devil, crushing him under countless tons of hard stone.

Chapter-271: Insurmountable

The massive pillar plummeted down and fell right on the Black Knight. The devil turned slightly at the last moment, lowering his sword to the ground. His crimson eyes flashed with unassailable menace.

As a thunderous crash resounded in the dark hall of the ruined cathedral, pieces of stone and clouds of dust flew into the air.

'Got you!'

A feeling of savage joy ignited in Sunny's heart. Without slowing down, he dove into the dust.

Of course, he didn't think the fiend would be destroyed by his trap. But it had to do some damage to the fearsome black armor, at least.

Nearing the place where he had last seen the tall dark figure, Sunny witnessed an incredible sight. The pillar... was floating high above the ground, its crushing weight resting on the shoulder of the steel giant. In the place of the impact, its surface had cracked and shattered.

The Black Knight, however, had not escaped unscathed as well.

His heavy breastplate fractured, revealing nothing but a mass of impenetrable, living darkness within. The pauldron on the shoulder that had received the blow was practically destroyed, leaving that whole arm hanging listlessly, twisted at a strange angle.

The helmet of the devil was dented and covered by a net of small cracks, each seeping with ghostly crimson light.

The Black Knight did not look good, if utterly terrifying.

What was even better, though, was the fact that he was currently stuck under the pillar, unable to move.

Sunny had to make use of that situation…

But before he could, the devil raised his broken arm and placed it on the column. Then, he lowered his head, as though gathering his strength… and effortlessly threw the monumental stone pillar into the air.

Sunny's eyes widened.

Diving down, he barely avoided the flying wall of granite. The pillar flew above his head and crashed down onto the marble floor, then rolled several times and came to a rest in a deafening rumble of shattering stone. The length of it blocked the grand hall, cutting the way for the rest of the cohort.

And also Sunny's path of retreat.

…Not that he had any plans of retreating.

Regaining his balance, Sunny brandished the Midnight Shard and dashed toward the wounded Black Knight for a vicious attack.

Both he and the Stone Saint arrived at the same time.

However, the Fallen Devil was still a force to be reckoned with. Despite the fact that his armor was cracked and his speed was somewhat diminished, there was still enough power in his body to obliterate all of them.

Holding the greatsword with one hand, he suddenly pulled it into a fearsome slash. The black blade whistled through the air, cutting a chaotic arc around the fiend.

Sunny was forced to jump back, but the Shadow managed to deflect the blow with her shield and redirect its power, slowing down only a little.

In the next moment, she closed the distance to the Black Knight and delivered a terrible strike of her own, aiming at the base of his

sword's blade.

The Knight simply moved the sword away, then violently bashed her in the head with the pommel, causing bits of the stonelike metal to fly into the air.

The Saint staggered back, the visor of her helmet shattered.

…Unlike the mass of darkness hiding in the black suit of steel armor, there was an actual face beneath hers.

Sunny allowed himself to stare for a fraction of a second. This was his first time seeing the face of his Shadow, after all.

The Stone Saint looked just how he had imagined. Her skin was grey like granite, and the features of her face were almost like that of a human — with the exception that they were just too flawless. It was as though she had not been born, but actually cut from stone by a mad sculptor, one obsessed with absolute perfection.

As the result, what should have been beautiful looked eerie and hideous instead. In fact, glancing at the inhumanly perfect face of his Shadow, Sunny felt nothing but a cold sense of revulsion.

…Fright, even.

The fact that her haunting face was utterly devoid of any hint of human emotion only made it even more disturbing.

The Shadow caught herself from falling and dashed to the side, avoiding another strike from the terrifying giant, which was effortlessly chained after the first one. The greatsword fell down once more, shattering the marble plates of the floor in the spot she had been just a moment ago.

It was then that Nephis rejoined the fight.

The three of them attacked the Black Knight simultaneously, perfectly coordinating their assault. Changing Star threw her longsword forward, aiming to sever the broken arm of the devil entirely.

The Stone Saint went after the greatsword again.

And Sunny did something crazy.

Dashing to the enormous black blade, he… stepped on its surface and ran up, using it as a ladder. He had a solid second of stability before the greatsword was pulled into another attack. Feeling it moving beneath his feet, Sunny used the momentum to jump up and grab onto the helmet of the terrifying fiend.

Mounting the devil, he hung from the Black Knight's neck and delivered a savage stab at his shoulder. His aim was just a centimeter away from the edge of the pauldron.

Sunny's hand was empty when he started the strike, but by the time it reached its mark, the Moonlight Shard was already grasped in it.

During their journey back to the Dark City, he had noticed that Ascended Memories received a less dramatic enhancement from the Crown of Dawn. Unlike the Awakened ones, they weren't elevated by almost an entire rank in terms of power. The augmentation, however, was still significant.

Enough to breach the gap between the ghostly stiletto and the armor of the Fallen Devil, at least.

The needle-sharp point of the Moonlight Shard broke through the impenetrable steel and sunk deep into the shoulder joint of the indestructible black armor.

Obviously, Sunny knew that this strike would not do a lot of damage to the fiend. But dealing damage was not his goal.

Devil or not, Fallen or not, the Black Knight still had to obey the laws of physics. In particular, having several inches of steel… glass?... stuck in the joint of his armor was inevitably going to reduce the mobility of his arm.

Indeed, with both of his arms damaged, the speed with which the fiend was able to move his greatsword around considerably diminished. It was still utterly terrifying, nevertheless.

But not insurmountable anymore.

Just a moment faster than the Black Knight, the Stone Saint stepped over the black blade and pinned it to the floor with one of her greaves. Using all of her weight to keep it down, she threw her sword aside and raised her shield high above her head with both hands.

For a moment, time slowed down.

And then the Shadow brought the shield down, delivering a devastating blow to the weakest point of the greatsword.

The rim of the stone shield hit against the black steel…

And with a deafening ringing, the greatsword shattered.

Chapter-272: Shadow and Darkness

Augmented by the shadow and with the help of nine hundred fragments that Sunny had collected, the Saint had become incredibly strong. The graceful stone body of the taciturn monster hid incredible power to begin with, and now, it was vastly enhanced.

Holding her shield with both hands, the Shadow delivered a devastating blow at the weakest point of the black blade. The blade, which was pinned between the marble floor and her greave, rang deafeningly… and shattered.

Still mounting the Black Knight, Sunny grinned with vicious joy.

Then, he let go of the dented helmet of the devil and pushed himself off, performing a backward flip and landing nimbly several meters away.

Nephis immediately disengaged, too.

Both of them knew that there was nothing more dangerous than an enemy on the brink of death. With nothing to lose, humans often relinquished any sense of self-preservation and turned berserk, taking their killer with them to the grave.

Nightmare Creatures were much the same, only more terrifying.

Despite the fact that Sunny was sure that the devil's weakness hid in his sword, he wasn't certain what would happen if the blade was actually broken. Hopefully, the Black Knight would just crumble into a pile of steel.

If not… it would be better to be far away when they found out.

As the shards of the black blade rained on the floor and the Stone Saint fell on one knee, a shudder ran through the devil's body. The darkness hiding in the corners of the ruined cathedral suddenly boiled and lunged forward in a wave.

But none of it reached the Black Knight, annihilated by the radiance of Changing Star's intricate white armor.

The devil froze in a twisted pose, his hands powerlessly hanging down, his back bent. The black steel of his armor was… rusting. It was swiftly turning dull brown, its luster gone, its once impregnable surface looking corroded and brittle.

Then, he slowly and laboriously raised his head and turned it slightly to the side. As if staring at the face of the nameless goddess whose statue oversaw the dark hall of the ruined cathedral for thousands of years.

As the devil looked at the goddess, the crimson light of his eyes slowly weakened and dimmed…

…And then, suddenly, exploded into furious red flames.

The rusty armor came apart, exposing the mass of darkness hiding within. The darkness stretched its limbs and rose above the kneeling Shadow, the parts of the armor that floated in it giving the creature a vaguely humanoid shape.

Revealing its true form.

A ghostly colossus made of darkness and rusting steel towered above the taciturn monster like an omen of death, two crimson fires burning furiously in the black depths. Another flame appeared just beneath them, like a twisted mouth made from the flames of hell.

And then, a terrifying roar shook the ancient temple.

Sunny took an involuntary step back, a feeling of dread rising from the depths of his soul. His eyes searched for Nephis and found her standing a few meters behind the Stone Saint. Changing Star was hesitating, looking at the dark apparition with an uncertain expression.

She caught his gaze, lingered for a moment and then nodded, understanding what Sunny wanted to convey without the need for any words. Then, Nephis cautiously backed away, not letting the devil out of her sight.

What was going to happen next was not something a human could survive. Not a Sleeper, at least.

With a harrowing fury, the creature of darkness crashed down on the Shadow. Its hands tore through the air and wrapped around the taciturn monster's neck, then raised the living statue in the air as if her stone body weighed nothing.

The devil brought the Saint high above the marble floor of the ruined cathedral and squeezed her neck, as if trying to strangle her. A net of cracks streaked through the Shadow's armor, bits of stone falling down.

…Through all of it, the emotionless expression on the hauntingly inhuman face of the Saint did not change one bit.

But in her ruby eyes, a hint of a feeling appeared, much stronger than ever before.

…Disdain.

Letting go of the shield, she raised her hands, grasped the vambraces of the rusting armor, and easily shattered them in her grip.

As another roar resounded in the darkness, the taciturn monster fell back to the ground. Landing with nimble grace, she instantly dodged the claws of the apparition, which had bent down to shatter the living statue once and for all. Then, she took a step forward.

The Stone Saint was right beneath the leaning devil now.

As her ruby eyes flashed with ruthlessness, she lunged forward and delivered a crushing blow to his chest. Her gauntlet tore through the breastplate of the rusted armor and sank deep into the living darkness, right where a human heart would have been.

…Or a soul core.

A moment later, the crimson flames burning in the depths of the dark creature exploded into a wave of blinding red light.

…And disappeared.

The dark essence of the devil dissipated like fog, its remnants vanquished by Changing Star's radiance. The pieces of armor fell to the ground in a clangor of steel.

The terrifying devil of the cathedral, the Black Knight, was dead.

Sunny threw his head back and let out an exhilarated, vengeful laugh.

'Die! Die, you bastard! Die and go to hell, forever!'

Oh, revenge tasted so great!

A moment later, the voice of the Spell whispered sweetly into his ear:

[You have slain a Fallen Devil, Forsaken Knight.]

[Your shadow grows stronger.]

Sunny smiled.

'Anything else you want to add? A Memory? An... an Echo?'

However, a moment later, he forgot all about the Spell. A cold shiver ran down his spine.

Because right in front of him, something very strange was happening to the Stone Saint.

Her hand was still raised, frozen in the same position as when she had pierced the heart of the living darkness with her fist.

And in it…

'What the hell is that thing?!'

Chapter-273: Chrysalis

Grasped in the Shadow's fist was a strange, beautiful, and ominous gem. It was utterly black, as though suffused with impenetrable darkness. The glossy black surface seemed to devour light, turning the vast hall of the ruined cathedral even darker than it had been before.

Deep within that black void, crimson flames burned with a menacing red glow. It was pulsating in a slow and bizarre rhythm, drowning everything around in dim red light. Painted by it, the Stone Saint seemed to be drenched in blood. The gem she held looked like a bloody, still-beating heart that she had torn out of someone's chest.

Gazing at it, Sunny felt a strange sense of foreboding.

'What the hell is that thing?'

The gem looked sort of like a soul shard, but… different. He had never seen a black shard, to begin with, or one radiating such an intense glow. It also didn't seem like a piece of a broken core. On the contrary, it appeared… whole?

'Is that what a soul core of a Nightmare Creature looks like?'

No, not a soul core.

A soul?

Stunned, Sunny counted the crimson flames burning in the depths of the black gem. One, two, three… four.

Four flames for the four cores of Fallen Devil.

The thing that his Shadow held in her hand was the Black Knight's soul… or some sort of his essence, at least. But how had it turned into

a material form?

Did the Stone Saint do it? If so, how… no, why?

'What is she doing with it?!'

As Sunny and Nephis looked in stunned silence, the Shadow finally moved. Bringing the black gem close to her face, she lingered for a moment. A hint of a dark, macabre emotion appeared in her eyes.

And then, the Stone Saint… swallowed it.

Sunny blinked.

'...What?'

The Shadow opened her mouth, bit into the eerie crystal, and swallowed it.

Just like that, the soul of the Black Knight was devoured. The red glow it emanated disappeared, returning the world to its natural shade.

And a moment after that, the Stone Saint fell into the shadows and disappeared, too.

'Wait… I didn't dismiss her. What the hell is happening?'

Nephis looked at him with a perplexed expression.

"What just happened? What did she do?"

For once, Sunny didn't have to twist the truth and deceive anyone. Opening his mouth, he honestly said:

"I have no idea."

Walking over to the pile of rusty steel that remained after the devil had been destroyed, Sunny moved it around with his foot for a bit and then mumbled:

"There's no shards left. It's empty."

Changing Star remained silent for a few moments, then frowned.

Finally, she said:

"...Your Echo is very peculiar."

***

While everyone was recovering from the fight and tending to their wounds, Sunny walked to a secluded corner and dove into the Soul Sea.

The tranquil expanse of still water met him with familiar silence. Glancing at the rows of motionless shadows standing at the edge of it, Sunny noticed that the Black Knight had joined their ranks.

The steel giant stood among all the other creatures Sunny had slain, just as empty as the rest of them. There was no trace of the menacing and deadly Fallen Devil left. Now, he was just one of the shadows.

Sunny grinned.

"Welcome, you bastard. Make yourself at home. You're not going anywhere else ever, anyway."

A feeling of deep, dark satisfaction grasped his heart. Staring at the motionless form of his sworn enemy, Sunny had to stop himself from kicking the Black Knight with all his strength.

He was just a shadow now, after all. Kicking him would have been like kicking the air. Plus, Sunny wasn't vindictive to that degree. Killing the bastard once was enough for him.

"Who's the one laughing now, huh? I won't deny it, you got me good. But I'm still breathing while you're dead. At the end of the day, that's all that matters."

This world — no, both this world and the real one were full of creatures that were bigger, stronger, and more powerful than Sunny. Many of them had either threatened his existence or felt compelled to treat him like dirt to show their superiority.

But he was still here despite all of them, neither destroyed nor subjugated. He was free, alive, and growing stronger with each day.

One day, they would be the ones cowering in front of him or be destroyed by him. Just like the Black Knight had been.

With a dark expression, Sunny turned away and walked to stand beneath the black sun of his shadow core. Then, he summoned the Stone Saint.

…But nothing happened.

Sunny frowned, then repeated the summon again — to the same effect. Suddenly worried, he willed the runes to appear in the air in front of him.

Luckily, his worst fears did not come true. The Stone Saint was still listed as his Shadow.

'Then what is going on with her?'

Concentrating on the runes describing her name, Sunny made it expand and read:

Shadow: Stone Saint.

Shadow Rank: Awakened.

Shadow Class: Monster.

Shadow Attributes: [Battle Master], [Stalwart], [Spark of Divinity].

Shadow Description: [Shadow Saint was created by the treacherous Lost from Light in the cursed darkness of the Forgotten Shore.]

Shadow Fragments: [80/200].

So far, everything was the same. Even the number of shadow fragments he had fed her did not change.

However, there was a new string of runes shimmering beneath that number, where nothing had been before.

When Sunny saw it, his eyes widened.

The runes read:

[...The Stone Saint is evolving.]

He lingered for a few moments, and then looked up at the Shadow Core.

Somewhere inside, his Shadow was resting in the waves of nurturing dark flames, her very being going through a mysterious transformation. It appeared as though consuming the soul of the Black Knight had allowed her to enter a stage of growth that Sunny had not anticipated.

How long would that evolution process take?

And what kind of a transformation was the Saint going through?

Sunny had no idea.

However, he couldn't wait to find out.

Chapter-274: Salvation

Evolving… the Stone Saint was evolving.

Leaving the mindscape of the Soul Sea, Sunny furrowed his brow. His eyes, however, were full of excitement.

What exactly about her was going to change, though?

There weren't that many possibilities. It could be either her rank, her class, or her attributes.

It was logical to assume that by defeating an opponent of a higher rank, the Shadow would be able to ascend to a new rank herself. However, there was a flaw in that logic.

The Black Knight wasn't the first Fallen creature Sunny and the Saint had slain. In fact, he was the third, with the Corpse Eater and the Spire Messenger being the first two. That's not even counting the two Iron Spiders the living statue had butchered before falling to Sunny's blade herself.

But she had not done anything like pulling a black gem out of their corpses before.

So, most likely, what allowed her to absorb the soul of that particular Nightmare Creature was not the mere fact of its incredible power, it was the strange but obvious kinship that the two of them shared. At least Sunny felt that this guess of his was right.

That didn't help him understand what changes would occur to the taciturn monsters, though. Still, it was a very valuable piece of information to learn.

In the future, if Sunny wanted to evolve his Shadows, he would have to find not only a powerful, but also a suitable opponent for them to

defeat. A kindred abomination of higher rank or class.

Tilting his head, he tried to remember if there was another creature on the Forgotten Shore he knew of whose soul could be fed to the Saint. For a moment, the image of the walking colossus appeared in his mind.

'Yeah, no. Not gonna even think about that.'

Shaking his head, Sunny smiled slightly and walked over to his companions.

Now that their deal had been concluded…

The future he was so afraid of was finally upon them.

***

The light of lanterns invaded the spacious room that had once belonged to the priestess of this ancient temple. With six people entering its peaceful haven, however, it didn't seem so vast anymore.

Sunny looked around and sighed. The hidden quarters were just like he had left him. There were pieces of simple, but luxurious furniture carved out of pale wood, with a few mismatched things that he had scavenged from the ruins. The stone walls were decorated with intricate engravings. An empty chest that used to be full of shimmering soul shards stood dark and empty.

Feeding the Stone Saint had really bankrupted him. Sadly, being the master of a hungry Shadow was not the cheapest of ambitions...

On one of the walls, sets of lines were scratched into the stone, marking all the days he had spent living in the ruined cathedral. For a long time, this had been his home. The best home he ever had, really, which was a sad thing to say about a windowless stone room hidden in the middle of a cursed city.

But Sunny liked it a lot. He was going to miss this dark, quiet place very much.

The other members of the cohort, with the exception of Effie and

Cassie, were looking around with interest. Even Neph showed a bit of curiosity.

With a strange look on his face, Kai turned to Sunny and asked:

"This… this is where you lived?"

Sunny raised an eyebrow and shrugged.

"Yeah. Why?"

The beautiful archer smiled with visible delight.

"No, nothing. It's just that… this place is so tasteful! I did not expect your residence to be this chic."

'What is that supposed to mean?'

Sunny frowned.

"...What did you expect it to be?"

Kai looked down, suddenly flustered.

"Oh, you know. For some reason, I always imagined you sleeping on a floor in a cave. Yeah, stupid, I know. Why would there be a cave in a temple?"

Hearing that, Effie couldn't help but laugh.

"Uh… wait till you see what's in his closet, Night."

Sunny gave her a menacing look, but thought better of saying anything.

He understood that the huntress was just trying to lighten the mood.

Knowing what was going to come next, every member of the cohort was consumed by fear and doubt right now. Effie more than the rest, because her role in the spectacle that Gunalug had planned for them was especially cruel.

Sunny sighed.

A bit later, they were sitting around the hearth, the smell of food still lingering in the air. Everyone was silent, looking at the fire, their minds consumed with dark thoughts. Sunny knew that he had to make a decision now, but felt reluctant to do so.

Instead, he just watched the shadows dance on the walls of the hidden chamber.

After a while, Nephis finally broke the silence. Turning to him, she lingered for a bit, and then asked:

"We will be leaving in the morning. Will you come with us?"

Her voice sounded even, as always. But Sunny knew her well enough to discern notes of a suppressed emotion in it.

Hope…

'Hope is the poison that will get you killed.'

But no. This was the old Sunny talking. One who was comfortable hiding behind his insanity, one who had given up. Who was too afraid to face the ruthless truth and pay the price to take what belonged to him, was his by right.

Triumph. Salvation.

...And hope.

Sunny was done being afraid.

With a calm expression, he looked at Nephis and said:

"The day after tomorrow. I still have things to finish in the Dark City. I will join you the day after tomorrow… for better or worse."

She was silent for a few moments, and then a soft smile appeared on her face.

"...Thank you. I have some preparations to make, too. We will return to the Bright Castle together, then."

He gave her a nod and turned away.

Nephis had never shown any sign of being able to feel fear, at least not that he remembered. But he knew that it was just a front. In fact, she knew fear all too well. Better than anyone here, except maybe for him.

She was introduced to it at a very young age, after all.

So he suspected that behind her indifferent face and even voice, she must have been scared, too. She was just a young girl, after all.

And it was she who was going to fight the immortal Bright Lord to the death soon, not them.

Sunny looked at the shadows.

'One day. After one day, the prophecy will begin to come true.'

Chapter-275: Secrets of the Ruined Temple

As soon as the dawn came, bringing with it the mournful sound of retreating waves, Nephis and her cohort left the ruined cathedral.

Sunny remained alone, standing on the edge between the darkness of the old temple and the light of the new day.

Lingering in the ornate doorway, he remained motionless for a while and watched as the artificial sun rose into the bleak grey skies above the cursed city. After months spent in the company of other humans, being by himself once again felt strange… just like it had felt strange to be with other people after all the time he had spent on his own here before that.

Turning around, Sunny returned into the darkness.

The grand hall of the ruined cathedral was peaceful and quiet. Without the menacing steel guardian, there was no one here to disturb the silence anymore. Even the darkness that populated the corners was empty and docile now, not at all the living entity it had been once.

…It felt sort of lonesome.

Freely walking through the echoing expanse of the magnificent hall, Sunny looked around, taking in the sight of the cathedral that had sheltered him in the past from a new perspective. Despite spending so much time here, he had never seen it like this — in the same way the inhabitants of the Dark City must have seen it all those years ago.

Sunny had only looked down on the hall from the height of one of the ancient temple's support beams.

It looked majestic.

But it was also not safe anymore.

With the Black Knight dead, no one was left to defend the cathedral from the Nightmare Creatures that would want to claim it as their nest. So Sunny couldn't stay here for long.

Not that he had the luxury of that choice anymore.

Throwing one last look at the beautiful dark hall, Sunny sighed and began climbing the statue of the nameless goddess.

***

Back in the hidden chamber, it was once again utterly dark. Sunny hesitated for a bit and began collecting his belongings.

It didn't take him long.

Growing attached to material things was pointless on the Forgotten Shore. There was no way to take them with him to the real world, after all — if he was even going to survive that long.

But he still felt sad leaving all of his spoils behind. Back in the real world, Sunny never had a home like this, nor a lot of stuff to call his own. He had dreamed of enjoying a lavish lifestyle after becoming an Awakened, but got stuck in this hell instead. This spacious room he called his home was a form of consolation.

But now he had to leave.

In the end, he only took the bare necessities and then tidied the place up, wishing to leave it clean and orderly despite knowing that there was little chance of anyone stumbling on this place again.

After everything was done, Sunny glanced at the tranquil room and hesitated for a bit.

Then, he walked over to the wall where he had once scratched countless lines into the stone to count the days and summoned the Prowling Thorn.

He wanted to leave a mark of his presence here. Something to tell that he had lived in this hidden chamber, in the ancient ruined cathedral, in the Dark City, on the Forgotten Shore…

In this world. A small mark to witness that he had been here, had struggled here, and then left to fight for a chance to escape.

Sunny wanted to come up with some profound words, but nothing came to mind. He wasn't really a profound person, anyway.

What he really wanted to carve into the wall was his True Name. But even now, the paranoia stopped him. What if someone would come here one day and read it out loud? What a funny disaster that would be.

Finally, he raised the kunai and carved something beneath the lines that marked the days he had spent living in the ruined cathedral.

Then, Sunny turned around and walked away.

There were two runes left on the wall behind him.

One meaning sun.

The other meaning loss.

***

There were two things Sunny wanted to accomplish before tomorrow morning. One was in the ruins of a library that he had never finished exploring, and the other one was right here in the ruined cathedral.

Returning to the grand hall with his rucksack on his shoulder, Sunny walked past the statue of the nameless goddess and dove into one of the doors leading into the temple's inner sanctum.

He had never been there before, kept away by the living darkness and the Black Knight.

But now that the devil was gone, Sunny was finally going to see what was hidden inside.

Walking through the rooms and corridors that the priests and priestesses had once used, he looked around and didn't notice anything of interest. Everything was pretty much destroyed and ruined, with only a few mundane things remaining untouched.

There was nothing here at all — at least that was what others would think.

Sunny, however, suddenly stopped in front of a certain wall and tilted his head.

There was nothing special about that wall, at least nothing that could be seen. But he could feel a heavy mass of shadows hiding behind it, as though there was a hollow space there.

After searching for a while, he found a hidden lever and pressed it.

Or at least he tried. The ancient mechanism had rusted through and disintegrated over the thousands of years of neglect, of course.

With a sigh, Sunny summoned the Midnight Shard, looked closer at the hollow wall, and inserted the tachi into the seam between its moving parts. Then, he unceremoniously used the unbreakable blade as a lever and pushed with all his inhuman strength.

With a terrible scraping sound, a part of the wall slid away. The air rushed past Sunny, entering the dark mouth of a narrow corridor.

Behind it, a set of stone stairs led down.

Deep down underground.

With a resentful grimace, Sunny flourished the Midnight Shard to shake off the dust that clung to it, put it on his shoulder, and entered the secret passage.

Chapter-276: Black Door

The hidden passage led Sunny underground, twisting and turning through the mass of stone. Despite the fact that he had been cautiously walking forward for a few minutes now, Sunny felt that he was still beneath the cathedral. In fact, by his estimation, he was approaching its center.

And indeed, right beneath the spot where the statue of the goddess should have been, the narrow passage opened into a larger room. In it, a deep well leading even further down was situated, with a winding staircase spiraling down into the darkness.

Sunny frowned.

'What is it with this place and creepy dark wells?'

Going further down was going to place him dangerously close to the catacombs. He knew all too well what kind of danger that would pose — the last time Sunny had ventured into the maze of ancient tunnels below the city, he barely escaped alive.

After hesitating for a while, he stepped onto the staircase and began descending. Deep, ancient shadows surrounded Sunny, giving him a little comfort.

At least he was among his kin.

After a minute or so of walking down the stairwell, Sunny entered a large chamber that seemed to be carved into the bedrock, as opposed to being constructed by human hand. On the other side of it, a large door forged from black steel stood, illuminated by two burning torches.

Two thoughts entered Sunny's mind simultaneously.

The first one was that the metal from which the monolithic door was made looked eerily familiar. It was the same dark, lusterless, impenetrable alloy that the Black Knight had been made of.

The second thought was even more disturbing.

'...How come those torches are still burning?'

Had they been aflame for several thousand years?

Come to think of it, the torches looked very strange. They seemed to be producing light, but it was pale and ghostly. There was no heat that came with it, too.

The shadows cast by the ghostly flames were the most disturbing, though. Because of the movements of the fire, they were supposed to be dancing on the floor. But instead, the shadows were absolutely motionless. It was as though the light of the torches had trapped and paralyzed them somehow.

Sunny thought for a while, and then ordered his own shadow to stay back. The shadow did not protest — in fact, it was visibly relieved. Taking a few exaggerated steps back, it merged with the deep darkness at the exit of the stairwell and waited there, glancing nervously at the strange motionless shadows from time to time.

Sunny cautiously approached the black door and lowered the Midnight Shard into a protective stance. He was ready to face any sort of danger.

…But nothing attacked him.

The only thing that happened was a sudden chill that ran through Sunny's body when he had entered the circle of light cast by the two ghostly torches.

'These torches are… they are definitely some sort of a protective charm. I am almost sure that their power can harm even shadows.'

The question he had to ask himself, though, was this — were the torches meant to keep something from entering the space that hid behind the black door…

Or were they meant to keep something in?

Well… there was only one way to find out.

What Sunny was doing seemed absolutely crazy. But in fact, it was not. He had not come into this underground chamber just because of idle curiosity or because of being blinded by greed and the prospect of finding a treasure.

What led him here and pushed him to study the black door was his intuition.

By now, Sunny had to admit that his intuition was more than a mere manifestation of his subconscious. It had turned out to be correct one too many times.

Especially ever since he had consumed the drop of ichor.

After that day, he was able to sense the presence of divinity. And sometimes, he was even drawn to it — like he was drawn to this cathedral and to the mysterious key that lay buried in the body of the Lord of the Dead. The two seemed connected…

And Sunny felt that he was about to find out how and why.

But it was not all his intuition was capable of. There were other aspects to it, too.

In fact, Sunny suspected that it had more to do with his [Fated] Attribute than it had to do with the [Spark of Divinity.] If he were to guess, he would say that after he had been changed by the ichor, that Attribute was slightly enhanced, giving him the ability to sense subtle tremors that ran through the strings of fate from time to time — the strings that were, apparently, tightly wrapped around his body.

The combination of the change that happened to his eyes and his close relationship with those strings gave Sunny a slight affinity to revelations and fate — similar to the one Cassie had possessed, but infinitely less potent.

It was enough to guide him to this door and make him want to open it, nevertheless.

Stepping close to the monolithic black door, Sunny gazed at it and came to the conclusion that not even an entire army would have been able to break through this monstrous barrier.

There was, however, a small keyhole hidden on its dark surface.

Pulling on the string tied around his neck, Sunny took off the small metal key that hung on it and gripped it tightly in his hand.

After hesitating for a few moments, he carefully inserted the key into the lock of the black door.

…It fit perfectly. As soon as Sunny put the key into the lock, the faint light of divinity it emanated suddenly became a little bit brighter.

Sunny sighed, then readied himself and turned the key.

Something clicked inside the metal door, and then it silently opened. The pale light of the ghostly torches swayed, as though moved by an otherworldly wind.

Behind the door, a small room was carved into the rock.

And in it, a corpse in a dark mantle was chained to the floor inside a circle.

Sunny couldn't tell if the corpse belonged to a man or a woman, because there was a strange mask covering its face.

The mask was made out of black lacquered wood and carved to resemble the face of a ferocious demon. Its teeth were bared, with four fangs protruding from its mouth. The mask was crowned with three twisted horns.

Inside the black chasms of its eyes, there was nothing but utter darkness.

Chapter-277: Demon of Fate

Sunny held his breath, affected by the disturbing scene in front of him.

The corpse was kneeling on the floor of the small cell, its hands chained to the floor. There was a circle carved into the stone around it, with countless symbols that Sunny could not understand surrounding it.

However, the circle was broken. In the thousands of years since the fall of the Dark City, the floor of the dungeon cell had cracked, with several fractures running straight through the intricate engraving.

Whatever it was the circle was meant to contain had either perished or escaped a long time ago.

Now, the only thing that remained was a withered corpse.

Coming closer, Sunny took another look at the person who had been imprisoned and died under the ruined cathedral, in a cell situated exactly beneath the statue of the nameless goddess.

Because of the dark mantle and the black lacquered mask, Sunny couldn't glean a lot of information about the corpse. It seemed to belong to a human, but other than that, everything about it was a mystery.

What terrible sin had this person committed to be condemned to this awful death?

Strangely, Sunny's intuition was silent. It was as though there was nothing in front of him at all. To his sixth sense, the prisoner of the underground cell appeared as an empty space.

'...Weird. This person had clearly been either hated or feared a lot to

be locked behind all these barriers. Surely, finding such a creature would affect my fate… why don't I feel anything, then?'

With a tense frown, he took a deep breath and carefully stepped inside the circle.

…It was then that Sunny noticed a chaotic mess of runes drawn on the floor near the prisoner's left hand. The sight of them almost sent him into a seizure.

Staggering away, Sunny fell to his knees and threw up.

'Agh… damn it!'

Those runes… those were the same runes the Spell used to describe the mysterious Unknown. Only here, the intensity of the terrible effect they had on the mind of anyone who saw them was much, much stronger.

'What the hell?'

Wiping his mouth, Sunny grimaced and glanced at the masked corpse with a bit of resentment.

Then, he picked himself off the floor, took a deep breath… and looked at the terrible runes once again.

Immediately, Sunny felt a splitting headache and a sickening, terrible sensation spreading through his mind. It was as though all his thoughts and memories were being torn and twisted. But despite all of it, Sunny persevered and kept staring at the final message that the prisoner had left behind.

He knew he couldn't read the runes — he didn't know that particular language, and the Spell either was forbidden, incapable, or refused to translate them. But for some reason, Sunny felt compelled to try.

Fighting through the intense pain, he slowly studied the strange runes. And then, suddenly, his eyes widened.

Because right below the chaotic mess of them, a line of text was written in the script he was familiar with — the usual runic language

that the Spell always used.

This time, it did not provide any translation. Luckily, Sunny had studied these runes and knew enough about them to understand what was written himself.

The last thing the person imprisoned under the cathedral wrote before succumbing to death made him shudder.

Scratched into the stone was a short prayer:

"Hail Weaver

Demon of Fate

Firstborn

of the -unknown-"

***

Sunny stared at the runes until he was on the verge of losing consciousness. Only then did he turn away and close his eyes.

The nauseating dissonance of the terrible runes stayed carved into his mind. Only after several minutes passed did it fade a little, allowing him to breathe again.

So… the mysterious Weaver whose forbidden lineage he had inherited was, in fact, associated with fate. Just like Sunny himself.

What were the chances?

'...That's Fated for you, I guess.'

The word he translated as "Demon" wasn't the one used to describe Nightmares Creatures of the third rank, but a different one.

Perhaps calling it a spirit or a daemon would have been more suitable — a mortal, but powerful and ominous deity. One different from gods, but sharing the same nature. However, Sunny wasn't that versed in mystical terminology. All he knew was that the runic

language was incredibly rich in words describing all types of monsters and creatures, while the human language wasn't.

Hence "Demon" was fine with him.

Apart from the tantalizing revelation about the mysterious Weaver, he had noticed one other important thing by forcing himself to study the runes.

Before, Sunny had thought that there was a single entity that the Spell refused to call by its name and simply described as "-unknown-" — leading him to call it the Unknown.

…Yes, Sunny was not that imaginative when it came to word choice.

Whether the Unknown were a kind of beings, a single existence, or a force of nature, he did not know.

But now, he realized that there were actually two types of forbidden runes, and two things that the Spell did not know how or did not want to mention.

One was the same as those used in the description of the Drop of Ichor, which stated that the Vile Thieving Bird was hated both by the gods and by the Unknown. It also said that the reflection of the Unknown stayed forever frozen in the depths of Weaver's pupils, and that just looking at it drove the Thieving Bird mad.

The other was the same as those used in the description of the Stone Saint, which was created by "the last child of the -unknown-", and now here by the dead prisoner, who had called Weaver the firstborn of the "-unknown-".

'What the hell is all of this supposed to mean?'

His suspicion that Weaver had something to do with the creation of the Nightmare Spell only grew stronger after learning that he… she… it?.... they had something to do with the domain of fate. After all, the Spell seemed to be weaved out of numerous strings of fate, and there was this being called Weaver, who had the blood of gods in their veins, but was also somehow connected to the Unknown.

Feeling his headache only growing stronger, Sunny winced and shook his head.

'Later. I will think about it later.'

There would be time to ponder about all this later. Or not, if he dies trying to escape the Forgotten Shore. Either way, that time was not now.

Turning back to the chained corpse, Sunny cautiously avoided looking at the dangerous runes and kneeled in front of it.

He wanted to know what was hiding behind the mask.

But as soon as he touched it, the corpse suddenly shattered and fell apart, turning into dust right in front of his eyes. Even its dark mantle rotted and disappeared, as though the thousands of years that had passed since the fall of the Dark City and the destruction of the cathedral finally caught up with it.

Soon, all that was left was a pile of dust.

…And the lacquered mask lying on top of it, its black surface glinting slightly in the pale light of the ghostly torches.

Chapter-278: Weaver's Mask

Sunny looked at the black mask and the darkness hiding in its eyes. Its features were not as much contorted as fearsome by nature. It was simultaneously fearsome and somber, bestial and regal. As though existing at the border of all things.

But most of all, the striking mask radiated a sense of mystery.

The vicious fangs, the twisting horns, the black lacquered wood of it all… once again, his intuition was silent. There was nothing he felt toward the black mask, as though it didn't even exist.

'How strange.'

Sunny waited for a few moments, then picked up the mask and brought it to his face to take a closer look at it.

But just a moment after his fingers touched the sleek surface of the polished wood, the mask suddenly disintegrated into a swarm of countless white sparks. Acting like water, the stream of light flowed toward Sunny's chest and entered into his body, disappearing into the dark depths of his shadow core.

The voice of the Spell thundered suddenly, louder than it had ever been before:

[You have received a Memory.]

***

Sunny remained motionless for a few seconds, thinking about what just happened.

By now, he knew that some Memories could exist outside of the soul cores, just like how Shard Memories did.

Was the black mask one of them? Somehow, he felt that it wasn't.

'Why I am even guessing? Let's… let's just take a look?'

The reason he was lingering was because of the magnitude of the situation. Sunny didn't know anything about the mysterious mask, but he believed that this relic of the past was truly unusual. The circumstances that had led to its discovery were too extraordinary, and the place it was hidden in was too uncanny to think otherwise.

So he was understandably apprehensive.

With a bit of tension, Sunny dove into his Soul Sea and looked up at the spheres of light floating around the black sun of the Shadow Core. There was a new one there, which seemed to be much brighter than the rest.

Summoning it down, he soon found himself looking into the eyes of the dark mask that hovered in front of him. It was as though he was facing an invisible person wearing it. Shifting uncomfortably, Sunny lowered his gaze a little and looked beneath the black lacquered wood.

A moment later, he had to suppress the involuntary desire to cover his eyes with a hand.

Inside the black mask, seven radiant embers were burning with such intensity that it almost blinded him. All around them, incalculable ethereal strings were weaved into a pattern so vast and intricate that it almost seemed boundless.

'Seven anchors… gods!'

Stunned by the visage of the mask's spellweave, Sunny hesitated for a bit and summoned the runes that described it. What he saw made him take a step back and gasp.

Memory: [Weaver's Mask].

Memory Rank: Divine.

Memory Tier: VII.

Memory Type: Tool.

Memory Description: [Weaver believed that knowledge was the origin of power and so always hid behind numerous lies, wearing them as a mantle. No one knew Weaver's thoughts, Weaver's face, and Weaver's heart. Even the gods could not see what hid behind the mask.]

Memory Enchantments: [Mantle of Lies], [???], [Simple Trick].

Sunny had to look away for a moment to take a breath.

'Divine Memory of the seventh tier… holy hell!'

Words weren't enough to describe his astonishment. He was, however, surprised to see that the mask only had three enchantments. Sunny expected such a powerful Memory to have dozens of them — judging by how boundless and insanely complicated the weave of it was, there had to be that much, at least.

Just what were these three enchantments to require a myriad of diamond strings to support them?

Turning back to the runes, he concentrated on the enchantments and read further:

Enchantment: [Mantle of Lies].

Enchantment Description: [Hides the identity of its master.]

That description sounded very simple, but looking at the spellweave of the black mask, Sunny could tell that this enchantment was anything but. In fact, it was so vast and powerful that his mind was failing to even comprehend the scale of it.

The enchantment was indeed designed to protect the identity of the person wearing the mask from prying eyes, but what it actually meant was that any form of detection was powerless against it. And Sunny suspected that "any" was not a figure of speech in this case, but simply a constatation of fact.

For example, Cassie's Aspect Ability, which allowed her to see a

person's Attributes, would not work on someone wearing the mask. There were countless similar abilities among the Awakened... none of which would work either.

'I guess that explains why my intuition was silent about the prisoner and the mask itself. Whatever kind of fate-related sixth sense I have is also countered by that thing.'

Even more terrifying was the fact that the enchantment was not aimed at just the Awakened. The description of the Weaver's Mask stated that even the gods could not see through it, and it was honest truth. Nothing could penetrate the barriers of the Mantle of Lies, not even the sight of a god.

Sunny gulped.

'...Scary.'

But then, this incredible and frightening enchantment did not even take up a tenth of the volume of the ethereal diamond strings hiding beneath the surface of the black lacquered mask.

The second enchantment was much the same.

It was called [???], by which the Spell was telling Sunny that it wasn't going to say anything about it. Its description was also empty.

However, Sunny could tell that it had something to do with sight just by looking at the weave. He could also tell that it was not a passive enchantment, but an active one, meaning that currently, he could not access it.

Usually, that would mean that he would be able to once he became a true Awakened, but in this case, the amount of soul essence required to keep the enchantment activated for more than a fraction of a second was so vast that no Awakened would have been able to. Only a Saint would, perhaps.

However, Sunny was not sure that he wanted to try even if he had the ability. The things Weaver saw were capable of driving Unholy creatures insane, so it was wise to avoid going anywhere near that enchantment in the future… most likely.

...Most of the spellweave of the Weaver's Mask, however, was dedicated to the third enchantment, one that was called a "Simple Trick". Judging by the mind-boggling complexity of the pattern that made it possible, that trick of Weaver's was anything but simple, though.

It was the most bizarre, intricate, and ingenious thing that Sunny had ever seen.

Curious, he glanced at the description… and froze, his eyes opened wide.

The runes gleaming in the air read:

Enchantment: [Simple Trick].

Enchantment Description: [Reverses the effect of one's Flaw.]

Chapter-279: Guilty Conscience

Sunny remained silent for a long time, staring at the black mask. The tranquil sea of his soul was still and silent... not at all like the storm that was currently raging in his heart.

After a while, he thought:

'That Weaver was one sly guy… girl… person… being? Well, the fact that I don't even know that much only serves to prove the point. And I thought I was good at deceit and manipulation.'

How devious one must be to not let even the gods, even the Nightmare Spell know anything about them?

But it was fitting, in a strange kind of way. If Weaver's domain was that of fate, there was no other way. Fate was a terrifying, but subtle tool. Manipulating it to your advantage required a very special kind of genius, one that was directly opposite to any kind of directness, straightforwardness, and brutal power.

However, if given the choice, Sunny would have preferred to face War God in battle than to make someone like Weaver his enemy.

Masterful liars were far more dangerous than deadly warriors. He knew it better than most.

…Exiting the Soul Sea, Sunny hesitated for a little and then summoned the Weaver's Mask. The cool wooden surface of the mask appeared on his face, held in place by some invisible force.

Immediately, his vision changed slightly. Everything became sharper, clearer, more vivid. Sunny could feel the mask reaching into his eyes and connecting to something — the strange legacy he had inherited by consuming the drop of Weaver's blood. He sensed his intuition becoming more potent, too.

It was as though he could almost see the mysterious strings of fate that span across the entire world.

…Almost.

Glancing at the pile of dust that remained of the prisoner, Sunny frowned slightly.

The identity of the person who had been wearing the Weaver's Mask remained a secret. Just who had this corpse belonged to, and how had they ended up chained to the floor in a hidden dungeon cell beneath the majestic cathedral?

The easiest thing to assume was that it was Weaver themselves, but Sunny dismissed that theory immediately.

From everything he knew about the original master of the mask, the power of that creature was just below that of the gods… and that of the Unknown, perhaps. If Weaver appeared on the Forgotten Shore, the whole Dark City would have been wiped out of existence before any harm was done to them.

So who could have been wearing Weaver's Mask? Some powerful carrier of the Nightmare Spell that had received it as a Memory, just how Sunny did?

'Well…'

If Weaver was really a daemon, which was a strange kind of a lesser deity, was there a cult dedicated to them? Had there been priests and followers of Weaver? The message the prisoner had left behind sounded awfully close to a prayer. Had that person been deemed a heretic and condemned to this place for that reason?

Sunny sighed. There was no way to know.

Hesitating for a bit, he turned away and left the somber dungeon cell behind. He only had this one day to finish all the things he had left undone in the Dark City. There was no time for fruitless pondering.

Once outside, Sunny walked over to the place where he had left his shadow and took a look at himself through its eyes. What he saw

made him blink a couple of times.

'Huh…'

The black lacquered mask sat snuggly on his face, hiding his features. He couldn't even see his eyes, which were drowned in darkness.

What's more, even his height was somehow unclear. Sunny didn't actually become taller, but from the side, it looked as though he did… sort of? One second, it did, and the next one, it did not. It was sort of similar to how people's faces changed when lighted from different directions. In any case, he couldn't tell for sure how tall the person facing the shadow was.

'How fun!'

It was not that Sunny became completely unrecognizable, though. He would still have to be careful to hide the context clues about himself while wearing the mask. Mundane things like the way he walked, his usual mannerisms, and other subtle but unique details of his behavior could still betray his identity despite the fact that it was masked from all unnatural means of detection.

To truly make himself appear as something else, Sunny would have to put on a performance.

...Good thing he was practicing the Shadow Dance, then. Was it not designed to fully imitate someone else's battle style and physicality?

'What a wonderful coincidence...'

Finally, the moment he had been dreading came. It was time to test if the [Simple Trick] was really capable of turning his Flaw upside down.

Needless to say, Sunny was nervous. His lips became dry, and he unconsciously tried to lick them… but now there was a mask on his face, so he couldn't. That bad habit of his had to be put to rest, apparently.

'...Great. Alright, let's do this.'

Opening his mouth, Sunny said out loud:

"I am… very tall!"

In the process, he grimaced, expecting the familiar pain to invade his mind.

…But there was nothing.

Sunny froze, blinked a couple of times, and waited. Still, nothing happened.

Beneath the mask, a wide grin appeared on his face.

"I am not only tall, but also exquisitely handsome. But that is not all, I am incredibly honest and nice, too. Every girl I meet immediately falls in love with me. Boys, too! That's just how lovable, handsome, nice and tall I am. Everything I have just said is absolutely true."

His mind was peaceful and quiet. There was no pain, no pressure. In fact, Sunny felt great.

'Wow…'

Feeling an almost overwhelming desire to continue spouting lies, he laughed in exhilaration.

"Amazing! This can be…"

But then, a tremendous explosion of pain suddenly threw him to the ground. With a startled yelp, Sunny grasped his head and then groaned through gritted teeth, feeling as though it was about to burst.

'What the hell?!'

He just wanted to say how useful the ability to lie could be.

'Wait…'

The ability to lie would, indeed, be very useful. Which meant that by stating that fact, he would be telling the truth.

And the Weaver's Mask did not remove his Flaw, just reversed it.

So... it seemed like while wearing it, Sunny could not tell even a word of truth.

'Uh...'

That seemed like the right conclusion to make. But he needed to test it to be absolutely sure.

With a doomed sigh, Sunny waited for a moment and then said:

"My name is…"

A moment later, another pained scream resounded in the darkness of the underground chamber.

Chapter-280: One Last Job

Some time later, Sunny emerged from the ruins of the cathedral with a rucksack on his shoulder, took one last look back, and left.

Whatever his future was going to be, he doubted that he would come back here any time soon.

It was a bittersweet goodbye.

Cautiously walking through the familiar streets of the Dark City, where he knew every turn and every piece of rubble — in this district of it, at least — Sunny kept his guard up. Many things must have changed in the months he had been away traveling through the Labyrinth.

The Nightmare Creatures he knew and, more importantly, knew how to avoid might have wandered away or perished, and new horrors might have taken their place. He had to stay prudent and careful.

But still, his next and final goal was not that far away.

As he sneaked toward it, Sunny thought about the Weaver's Mask and the ways it could change his life. At first, he thought about simply never taking it off and walking around while delivering a deluge of lies. This way he would be safe from revealing his most guarded secret and becoming someone's slave, at least.

But after considering this seriously, he came to the conclusion that it was not the best decision in his current circumstances.

First of all, one couldn't be a part of any collective while lying all the time. Sunny had an unpleasant experience of being expelled from various groups for various reasons, and not being sincere and honest was one of the surest ways to make people want to avoid you at all cost… eventually, at least.

And no one was able to survive alone in the Dream Realm. Not in a way that a person would want to live, anyway.

Sunny knew a lot about this side of things, too.

But most importantly, he was not going to be able to keep this lying for long, anyway — not when dealing with people that already knew him. Kai and Cassie would notice the strange effect of the mask immediately: Kai because of his Ability to sense lies, Cassie because her Ability to see Attributes would suddenly stop working.

But others would catch on that something strange was going on with him pretty quickly, too, simply because of how drastic the change in his behavior would be. Especially Nephis, who knew him so well.

After that, they would inevitably have a lot of questions, and answering those questions — even with lies — would put him in more danger than he already was in.

So, sadly, Weaver's Mask was not a panacea to Sunny's current situation. At best, it would be able to help him avoid certain predicaments if used sparingly.

But really, he didn't want anyone to know that he was in possession of that Memory at all. Sunny had to think of the future.

If he was lucky enough to survive the fall of the Bright Castle and return to the real world… that was where the black mask could create miracles for him. It would allow him to have a hidden persona that was in no way connected to an Awakened named Sunless, and as such, allow him to do and achieve things that would have been impossible or too dangerous to try as himself.

To that effect, no one could know that the strange black wooden mask was connected to him, not even people whom he… somewhat… trusted.

Both for his own good and theirs.

'It is such a pity, though.'

It was. Just imagining Caster's face if he were to ever learn about

what type of treasure Sunny had somehow found this time was tempting enough to change his plans.

Caster…

Sunny's face darkened.

He had not forgotten about the promise Nephis had made him at the start of their journey to the Hollow Mountains. Tomorrow, he was finally going to learn what was the deal with the proud Legacy, and what exactly the relationship between Changing Star and him was.

…And how big were the chances of Sunny having to face Caster in battle.

Despite all his dislike for the handsome scion of the Han Li clan, Sunny was reluctant to actually fight him. No matter how much progress he had made to get ready for the bloody conclusion of this disastrous chapter of his life, Caster was still not someone to be taken lightly. He was a tremendously deadly opponent just based on what Sunny knew about him.

And there were secrets that the Legacy had been keeping, as well.

'That charm of his… what does it do?'

He was certain that he would defeat Caster if push came to shove. But the cost he would have to pay for that victory would be heavy... perhaps much more heavy than he was willing to pay.

Suddenly uneasy, Sunny silently shook his head and continued on his way.

As the sun began to roll toward the western horizon, he approached his goal — the ruins of an ancient library that stood lonesomely among the decimated buildings.

Back near the end of his lonely months of hunting monsters on the streets of the Dark City, Sunny had begun exploring this ruin for bits of information about the history of the Forgotten Shore. Because of his chance encounter with the Stone Saint, and then with Kai — which lead to him abandoning the ruins for a long expedition into the

Labyrinth — he had never finished this project.

There was this one vast mosaic, in particular, that Sunny was interested in. It sprawled across the entire floor of the library's main hall and was mostly covered by rubble.

In the past, Sunny was not strong enough to move the rubble out of the way. He had been hoping to make the Stone Saint do it for him, but sadly, the Shadow was currently slumbering in the depths of his Shadow Core, evolving into whatever it was she was going to turn into.

Just to be sure, he checked one more time to see if the mysterious process was still going, and sighed in disappointment.

Luckily, he had grown much stronger himself during these months. Sunny was pretty sure that now, he would be able to clear the mosaic with his own two hands.

It was just going to be a lot of work.

Sending his shadow into the library to make sure that no abomination had made its nest there during his absence, Sunny entered the cool shadow of the ruin and sighed.

'...Better get started.'

Soon, the scraping sound of heavy boulders being moved could be heard under the partially collapsed roof of the ancient building.

Chapter-281: Seven Heroes

In the depths of the night, Sunny was finally done with the arduous task of clearing the floor of the ruined library. Tiredly standing in the center of the circular hall, he found himself in the middle of a vast mural.

The mosaic had endured the passage of time in an almost pristine condition. Most of it was preserved perfectly, with only a few small sections destroyed by corrosion or the ill will of the creature that inhabited the Crimson Spire.

By now, Sunny was certain that it was the Terror of the Forgotten Shore that had obliterated any depictions of the seven heroes' faces. He didn't know how it was possible, but felt that the same furious force that had decapitated the ancient statues was responsible for the damage done to the engravings in the ancient mine and to this mural.

It was as though the Terror wanted to erase any sign of the founders of the Starlight Legion from history. Their names were forgotten, every person that had known of their stories turned into dust, and even the stones that bore their image were desecrated and shattered.

How great the resentment that the evil creature harbored toward them must have been, for it to go to such lengths in its mad desire to obliterate their legacy?

With a sigh, Sunny turned slightly and walked to the edge of the mural. He was searching for the start of its story.

Depicted on the mural was not one image, but a long series of them, spiraling from the edges of the mosaic to its center like a long scroll. On them, the history of the land consumed by darkness was shown, ending with the coming of a new dawn.

Sunny already knew what events had brought the curse of all-

consuming darkness to the Forgotten Shore and how the ancient inhabitants of this land fought against all odds to resist it.

Now, he was going to learn the final mystery — the reason for their eventual downfall.

Finding the first image, he studied it and lingered for a bit. Then, he walked on, watching the history unfurl itself beneath his feet.

As the curse subdued the world under the veil of everlasting darkness and terrible creatures started to attack the human settlements, one after another, mighty champions began to appear to battle them. But no matter how strong, brave, and valiant those champions were, none of them was able to resist for long.

Especially not when their own allies started turning into monsters. It was impossible to face the terrifying foes hiding in the darkness when no one was there to cover your back — or even worse, if those you trusted the most to do so were the ones delivering a deadly blow instead.

But still, humanity persisted. Months passed, then years. And eventually, a new generation grew up in this horrible world.

"Born in the all-consuming darkness, seven valiant heroes gave an oath to return the light to the cursed land." Sunny whispered.

The people who would later create the Starlight Legion were indeed born in the darkness. They never even saw the light that they would swear to bring back. All they knew of it were the tales their elders had told them, tales of a time when people never turned into nightmares, and the beautiful stars shone even in the darkest of nights.

This new generation grew up surrounded by nothing but darkness and horror, and was forged by it into a far more fearsome force than their parents had ever been. Hard times created hard people, and their time was as unforgiving and harrowing as one could imagine. Beyond so, even.

And so, the people it created adapted to match this dark reality.

Eventually, seven of them rose above the rest, each leading their faction in the constant battle against the encroaching doom.

Sunny stopped and studied the image that showed all seven of them… even if their faces were damaged beyond recognition.

There was a knight in an intricate plate armor forged of white metal, with a stalwart blade grasped firmly in his hands.

A graceful priestess in a light flowing robe, her delicate hands shining with gentle light.

A mighty hunter in an archaic cuirass leaning on a beautiful bronze spear.

A masterful builder holding a mason's hammer in his calloused hands.

A regal lord with a humble crown resting on his head, a single gem decorating its simple design.

A subtle and merciless slayer with a ghostly stiletto hidden cunningly behind her back.

And a stranger from a misty land who wore a stonelike armor and never showed his face, with a heavy round shield resting at his feet.

Sunny looked at the seven heroes, thinking.

"Knight, Hunter, Lord, Stranger, Slayer, Builder, and Priestess. Midnight Shard, Zenith Shard, Dawn Shard, Dusk Shard, Moonlight Shard. And the other two… Sunlight Shard and Starlight Shard?"

The fate of the last two Shard Memories remained unknown to him. Nephis must have known something, though. Otherwise, she would not have ventured into the dangerous expedition to the Hollow Mountains to seek out the Crown of Dawn.

Although the history of the Forgotten Shore was presented in more detail here, it did not give him any revelations yet. Thoughtful, Sunny turned away from the image of the seven heroes and continued on.

At some point in history, the heroes came together, created the Starlight Legion, and united the surviving remnants of humanity under its banner. It was also then when they gave their defiant oath.

'They must have been mad…'

Wasn't striving to achieve something impossible the definition of madness? Sunny frowned, knowing full well that, in this case, the seven heroes actually managed to fulfill their crazy ambition.

It was all a little too close to home. He also knew someone who liked to set impossible goals and had an infuriating track record of proving them possible.

But how did it all end? Yes, the heroes achieved their dream. But the Forgotten Shore still turned into a desolate hell.

What happened to their light?

Looking at the next images of the mosaic, Sunny got a feeling that he was about to find out.

Chapter-282: Sacrifice

As Sunny walked in circles, drawing near to the center of the mosaic, he saw the depiction of various deeds that the Starlight Legion had achieved.

The warriors led by the seven heroes were truly a fearsome force. Forged and tempered by the relentless malice of their dark world and the unassailable will of their leaders, they drowned the Forgotten Shore in the blood of the cursed creatures.

Even though many of them had turned into monsters themselves — especially those who had allowed themselves to falter in their conviction — the rest continued on, unbroken.

Sunny couldn't tell how powerful exactly the members of the legion were, but from some clues of their battles, he guessed that they were at approximately the same level as the Awakened of his own world, at least at the beginning. With time, however, it seemed as though the warriors of the cursed land had grown much stronger.

If most of the creatures they were fighting were of the Corrupted rank, then that would put the Legion far above the humans back in the real world. Sunny wasn't sure if the seven heroes and their soldiers were carriers of the Nightmare Spell, though, and if the same hierarchy of power could be applied to them.

Eventually, the surviving humans migrated to the shore of the colossal impact crater and built an impregnable wall around their new city. This endeavor alone was so arduous and ambitious that he couldn't help but feel a sense of awe.

Sunny slowed his steps.

On the images in front of him, the construction of the Crimson Spire… no, it wasn't crimson yet back then… had begun. The

cyclopean tower was built west of the city, reaching high into the sky like an axis of the world.

Like a stairwell that was designed to allow humans to touch the heavens.

This was what he was truly interested in. Sunny wanted to know what happened in the Spire, how the artificial sun was created, and how the darkness that consumed this land was turned into a transient black sea.

What he saw next made him falter, and then close his eyes with an expression of deep, exhausted resentment.

In the second to last image, the seven heroes were depicted standing apart in the seven spots of the Forgotten Shore. In front of each of them, a crowd of thousands of people kneeled, waiting.

Among those people were the warriors of the legion and the civilians from the city, men and women, old and young.

Each of the heroes held a weapon in their hands.

'Of course. Of course, this is what happened. What else would it be?'

A feeling of dark, bitter disappointment grasped his heart. Sunny didn't even know why he felt this way. It was not like he knew anything about the seven heroes, really. But at some point, maybe because he needed to believe that there was a tiny glimmer of light in the vast and endless night, he had begun thinking of them as a symbol of the best humanity could be.

...What a foolish thought.

He of all people should have known better.

"Curse you all."

In the last image, one that took the center of the mosaic, seven tall hills made of dead bodies surrounded the Spire. Tens of thousands of people had been slaughtered, their blood flowing like rivers toward the dark tower. On top of each hill stood one of the valiant heroes,

their hands stained red to the shoulder.

As the last sacrifice, the slaughterers turned their weapons on themselves, thrusting them into their hearts.

…And somewhere out there, he knew, a tiny black seed floated in a pool of blood.

Sunny grimaced in disgust.

'This was your dream? This is how you decided to bring back the light? You sick wretches…'

As the rivers of blood flowed to the Spire, seven streams of glowing crimson light moved above them and entered it from seven directions. These streams represented the soul essence of numerous humans who had been sacrificed to create the artificial sun.

But theirs wasn't the most terrible fate.

In the center of the Spire, a lone human figure was drawn, convulsing in harrowing agony as the raging storm of soul energy entered her body. The conflux of all that power, the sacrificial vessel meant to be its conduit. The anchor of the sun.

Sunny recognized that figure, too. To him, the features of her face were painfully familiar.

It was the same face as that of the nameless goddess whose statue stood in the ruined cathedral.

The crimson light entered her body and shot from her screaming mouth and eyes upward, pure and white. It rose to the height of the Spire, where a new sun was being born.

Frightened by its light, the darkness retreated underground, where it was locked behind seven seals that were left behind by the heroes as their last deed.

The rest was easy to deduce.

After the heroes perished to create the artificial sun, everything was

fine for a while. But then, maybe after a few decades, or even hundreds of years, the light of the sun began to dim.

So the people of the Dark City had to make a new sacrifice. Perhaps, the second time, only seven people had been killed to renew the power of the Spire.

But then it happened again, and that time, seven was not enough. So they sacrificed fourteen. And when it happened again, they sacrificed a few dozen.

And eventually, hundreds of people were being slaughtered every year to keep the sun burning. Because of the simple fact that the seven heroes and their people… all of them had terribly mighty souls. But their descendants, who didn't have to grow up in utter darkness and fight terrible monsters to live through the day, did not.

And at some point in this vicious cycle, the Vessel that had been imprisoned in the Spire and served as the anchor for the bloodthirsty sun was corrupted. Whatever kind of conscience it had left had been completely shattered.

The nameless goddess of the Dark City became the Crimson Terror of the Forgotten Shore.

All that pain, all that rage, all that blood exploded from the Spire and infected the very land itself, growing into an endless labyrinth of the strange crimson coral. The seven seals came undone, releasing that darkness that had been imprisoned underground for hundreds of years.

This was what Cassie had seen in the vision.

The darkness and the fury of the newborn Terror fell on the humans of the Dark City like a tide and wiped them all out, erasing even the memory of them from the face of the world.

…This was how the Forgotten Shore was born.

Chapter-283: Final Piece of the Puzzle

'So this is how it is.'

Sunny stared at the last image of the mosaic, a dark and resentful expression frozen on his face.

Depicted in the center of the mural, a sun fueled by blood shone on the mountains formed by dead bodies. Tens of thousands of people had been slaughtered to create it, and thousands more must have been butchered later on to keep it burning in the indifferent sky.

The first sacrifices had died willingly, lured into submission by their fanatical rulers. What about those who came after? Somehow, Sunny doubted it.

And for what? How did it all end?

The seven seals had been broken, and the ancient civilization had been obliterated.

But the sun created and nurtured by it was not destroyed… just corrupted. It still rose in the morning and fell beyond the horizon after the dusk, illuminating the desolate hell of its own creation.

As long as its vessel, the Terror of the Crimson Spire, existed at the center of the Labyrinth, it would continue to shine in the cold grey skies. And as long as it did, the darkness that had escaped its underground prison and turned into the cursed sea was going to continue coming and going, scared of its light.

'Great. The two deserve each other…'

He didn't know why the all-consuming darkness had become a literal

sea of impenetrably black water, but had a guess or two. Either hundreds of years spent locked away behind the seals had affected it that way, or the artificial sun had.

The Terror had been changed by the curse, so why couldn't the curse be changed by the Terror in return?

'Why wasn't that sun extinguished, though?'

There was no one alive on the Forgotten Shore to make sacrifices to the Spire anymore, but Sunny suspected that there was a reason for why the crimson coral seemed to grow either out of or toward bones. If he was right, the whole Labyrinth was a giant maw with which the Terror absorbed the soul essence of every creature that bled on the coral before it died.

It was all a part of its body.

Sunny shivered, realizing that both the Labyrinth and the dark sea were, in fact, colossal living creatures. It was just that the scale of them was so boundless that they seemed like forces of nature.

Compared to the eternal struggle of the two titanic beings, the struggle of a handful of tiny humans was nothing short of insignificant.

…Or was it?

Suddenly, he frowned.

What about Nephis and her plan? How did the Shard Memories come into all of this?

At first, a dark thought entered his mind. He imagined that Changing Star was preparing a mass sacrifice of her own, a hecatomb to appease the Crimson Terror. The number of the Sleepers being sent to the Forgotten Shore each year was too eerily similar to the number of sacrifices made to the Crimson Spire by the inhabitants of the Dark City to be a simple coincidence.

But he quickly dismissed that thought. After all, the sacrifices were meant to renew the power of the Blood Sun, and that was not Neph's

goal. If anything, she meant to destroy it once and for all to gain entry to the Gateway hidden in the Spire.

So… what did it all mean?

Sunny scowled, remembering every piece of information about the seven heroes and their cursed land he knew. And most importantly, those that came directly from the Spell.

After a while, he muttered:

"...Time has erased their names and their faces, but the memory of the defiant oath still remains."

This was the second part of the description that the Spell had given the Starlight Legion Armor.

His eyes widened.

All this time, he thought that this sentence simply meant that the legacy of the seven heroes lived on even after their deaths. But now, he suddenly realized that the truth might have been far more straightforward.

The key to understanding the secret of the Shard Memories was right in front of him this whole time. In fact, it came from the first Memory he had ever gotten on the Forgotten Shore.

The Azure Blade.

"On this forgotten shore, only steel remembers," he whispered, a sudden understanding dawning on him like a revelation.

The memory of the defiant oath remained… and only steel remembered. Sunny rubbed his face.

"I am such a fool."

Everything he needed to learn the truth had been at his disposal from the very start of it all. The heroes were long gone, but their terrible oath was still here, preserved in cold steel.

It was not the memory of it that remained… but the Memory.

The Shards were that Memory.

"Of course. It all makes so much sense now…"

But then, what was their purpose and why was Nephis so motivated to find each one?

That was easy to guess, too. Cassie had basically told him, all those months ago.

"...In the end, I saw a colossal, terrifying crimson spire. At its base, seven severed heads were guarding seven locks."

In its fury, the Terror of the Crimson Spire had beheaded the statues of its creators and brought their heads as trophies to guard the entrance to its lair… where Cassie had seen them, as well as seven mysterious locks.

What did a lock need?

A key. All locks required a key to either open them or shut them closed.

Sunny slowly exhaled.

The seven seals that kept the all-consuming darkness locked underground came undone, but they weren't destroyed. If one had all the keys, it was still possible to seal the cursed sea once again. That was what the seven heroes had left behind.

…And with the cursed darkness locked away, the Spire would lose its most deadly line of defense.

Finally, everything became clear.

Sunny remained motionless for a long time, looking at the bloody images beneath his feet. After a while, he sighed and turned away.

There was a bitter taste in his mouth.

"...Sick. I am sick of this place. So sick of all of this."

Cassie's vision showed her fire and rivers of blood?

Good.

It could all burn to the ground.

He didn't care anymore.

Chapter-284: Nothing Serious

In the cold light of dawn, Sunny approached the spot where the other members of the cohort and he agreed to meet. The shadow had already located their camp in the ruin of an ancient building and was currently watching them, hidden in the darkness.

The five youths were busy preparing for the last stretch of the way to the Bright Castle. They were calm and collected, not at all like people who were about to face the horrifying wrath of the Bright Lord.

What kind of horror had they not faced already?

Climbing over the rubble, Sunny let Nephis and the rest know of his approach and jumped down.

Landing just a few meters away from the group, he straightened his back and gave them an indifferent look.

"Hey."

They greeted him in a reserved manner. A palpable tension permeated the air, making everyone reluctant to speak too much. Only Effie was seemingly unaffected by this dark mood.

Leaning on a stone wall, the huntress was enthusiastically gnawing on a juicy bone. Her white teeth were effortlessly crushing it into tiny pieces, which were then chewed and swallowed along with the marrow. Noticing Sunny, she smiled.

"Hey, doofus."

He gave her a nod and wanted to turn away, but then noticed a slight frown that appeared on Effie's face. Looking at him with a bit of uncertainty, she asked:

"Uh… you alright?"

Sunny was silent for a few moments, then smiled. Finally, he said in an even tone:

"I'm perfect."

Leaving the doubtful huntress behind, he walked past Caster and approached Nephis.

The Changing Star was standing with her back to the group, looking up at the silhouette of the Bright Castle that loomed in the distance. Hearing his steps, she turned around.

The gentle light of dawn reflected in her eyes, making them appear to shine.

"...You've made it, Sunny. I am glad."

He shrugged.

"Why? You didn't expect me to show up?"

She was silent for a while, and then looked away. A lock of silver hair fell on her eyes. Nephis tucked it behind her ear and sighed.

"Could I not? It's not like I know the future."

After that, she smiled.

'...Amusing.'

In the eleven months they had spent on the Forgotten Shore, this was only the second time Sunny heard Changing Star tell a joke, and the first time it was actually funny.

If a little macabre. But what was the harm in indulging in a bit of dark humor, at this point?

Sunny did not return the smile, however. Glancing in the direction of the Bright Castle, he asked:

"So, what's the plan?"

Nephis shrugged.

"This time there is no plan. We have confirmed that Gunlaug is still pretending to be looking for Effie to bring her to justice for killing the missing Guards. Once we enter the outer settlement, the members of the Host will come for her. Then, I will most likely be forced to challenge him. We'll… see after that."

Sunny looked at her with a dark expression.

'Pretty much exactly what I expected.'

He didn't hesitate to ask:

"Can you really break his armor? Even with the Dawn Shard, your sword is barely equal to an Ascended Memory. And that thing is a true Transcended Echo."

She lingered for a while before answering. When she finally spoke, her voice was calm and even:

"I don't have to break the armor. I just have to break the man."

Sunny shook his head with a humorless smile.

"Good luck achieving one without the other."

He paused for a moment, and then said without a hint of levity in his voice:

"Anyway. You owe me a conversation."

Changing Star glanced at him, then nodded.

"Alright. But not here."

With that, she gave the others a sign to wait and walked away. Sunny followed.

His shadow stayed, making sure that no one was going to try and eavesdrop on them. It was staring directly at Caster, following his every move with intense attention.

As they were walking, Sunny suddenly said:

"By the way, I have something to tell you, too."

Nephis glanced at him and slightly raised an eyebrow.

"Yes? What is it?"

Sunny was silent for a bit. Then, he smiled.

"Oh, it's nothing serious. Do you remember a guy called Harper?"

She frowned, then shook her head.

"Should I? Who is he?"

Sunny shrugged. His expression remained neutral.

"Just a guy that I killed. He was one of Gunlaug's spies."

Neph looked at him for a few moments, then asked with indifferent confusion:

"What about him?"

A slight shadow ran over Sunny's face. However, his smile remained exactly the same.

"...No, nothing. Just wondered if you knew him."

When they walked far enough and were concealed from the eyes of the cohort by several tall walls, Changing Star stopped and turned to face him. Looking at Sunny, she said:

"It is good that we can speak privately. Actually, I wanted to ask you a favor."

He blinked.

'Well, that is unexpected.'

"What is it?"

She hesitated for a few moments.

"After my fight with Gunlaug is over, if… when I win, I might not be in the best shape. Even if I am, there will be a flood of soul essence pouring into my body. It will incapacitate me for a bit."

The changes that happened to the body after a small portion of soul essence was consumed were subtle, but in large quantities, it could be disorienting, sometimes even debilitating for a short while.

Sometimes, experiencing these changes and getting used to them took a little time.

Sunny tilted his head.

'A flood of soul essence? What does it matter if her core is either full to the brim or at least almost saturated?'

He frowned, trying to guess what she wanted from him.

"So what do you need me to do? Keep Harus busy while you recover?"

She shook her head, then looked away.

A light sigh escaped from Changing Star's lips.

"No. I want you to make sure that Caster is nowhere near me when that happens."

Here it was. The truth was about to come out.

Sunny stared at Nephis, his expression cold and dark. After a few moments of tense silence, he asked:

"Why? What's the deal with you and Caster?"

She looked at him, her striking grey eyes calm and deep.

Then, she said:

"It's very simple, really. Caster has been sent here to kill me."

Chapter-285: Kill Order

Sunny remained silent for a few moments. Finally, it became clear that Nephis wasn't going to continue. Feeling a slight sense of exasperation, he asked:

"Why would Caster want to kill you?"

Despite the calm appearance, there was a tempest raging in his mind. The revelation of Caster's true intention had shaken Sunny. Yes, he disliked the proud Legacy, and yes, their dynamic with Changing Star had always been a bit strange, but he never expected to hear something like this.

In his mind, Caster was more of an opportunist with distasteful ambitions, most likely having to do with the purity of his clan's bloodline, than a cold-blooded killer.

In what world did him wishing to kill Nephis make any sense? He was her number one fan. The only logical explanation Sunny could find was that the proud scion had been secretly working for Gunlaug all along. But then, that theory also didn't hold when subjected to a close inspection — the Bright Lord was determined to kill Changing Star with his own two hands and in front of hundreds of people.

What would he need Caster for?

Nephis lingered for a bit, then shrugged.

"People have been trying to kill me for as long as I can remember. Have you forgotten?"

Sunny slowly shook his head.

"No… no, I did not. But what does that have to do with Caster?"

She smiled.

"They were not going to stop just because I came of age, survived my First Nightmare, and was sent into the Dream Realm. If anything, that would have been the perfect opportunity to finally make me disappear forever. Sleepers enter this cursed world alone, away from the protections of society and whatever allies they might have in the real one. Do you see?"

He gave her a nod, his expression growing dark.

Indeed, no one was as vulnerable as young Sleepers entering the Dream Realm for the first time.

Nephis sighed and looked away.

"In any case, when I enrolled into the Academy, I knew that someone among our classmates had to have received orders to make sure that I never return from the Dream Realm. I just didn't know who it was."

Suddenly, she glanced at him. The corner of her lips curled upward.

"...Actually, for a long time, I thought that it was you."

Sunny blinked and stared at her in disbelief.

"What? Me? Are you cr… actually, never mind. What exactly about me made you think that I'm an agent of some secret Legacy cabal? Do I look like a Legacy to you?"

Nephis calmly looked him in the eye.

"Honestly? Not any Legacy that I know. But there were too many things about you that didn't make sense."

He frowned.

"Do tell."

She slowly raised her hand, then began counting on her fingers.

"Let's see… you claimed to be an orphan from the outskirts, but

somehow managed to survive both the First Nightmare and the arrival on the Forgotten Shore. You didn't consume any soul shards, but kept growing more powerful. You said that you had never held a sword in your hand, but absorbed my lessons with astonishing speed.

And finally, every other word you said was a lie, especially when it came to your origins, your past, your strength, and your Aspect."

Running out of fingers on one hand, she made a fist and pointed to it:

"Need I continue?"

Sunny cleared his throat.

"Uh, no… well, when you put it like this…"

She smiled and shook her hand, then lowered it.

"But after some time, I realized that my suspicions about you were wrong. If you were really tasked with killing me, you could have just left me on the Ashen Barrow. Back then, I was as good as dead. But you didn't. In fact, you risked a lot to take both Cassie and me with you."

The smile slowly disappeared from her face.

"So when we reached the Bright Castle and Caster immediately appeared, insinuating his way into my inner circle, I knew pretty much instantly that it was him."

Sunny frowned.

"Aren't you getting ahead of yourself? Don't get me wrong, I'm the last person in this world who would want to defend that pompous bastard, but there were hundreds of Sleepers in our crop, and out of those, only seven were sent to the Forgotten Shore. And only four lived long enough to see the Castle. What are the chances that the person with orders to make you vanish was among them?

Isn't it a bit too big of a coincidence?"

Changing Star slowly shook her head.

"Who said it was a coincidence? People often tend to forget that the Spell has a mind of its own. It sees all and hears all. And it really loves to play with fate. If there was someone among those hundreds of people tasked with killing me, the chances of me having a fateful encounter with them in the Dream Realm would be all but guaranteed. That is how the Spell always does things."

Sunny had to agree. The Spell, indeed, loved to play with fate.

His whole damn life was proof of that.

Meanwhile, Nephis continued:

"Of course, despite my suspicions, I wasn't sure at first. But the more I observed Caster, the more convinced I became that I was right. He did everything in his power to get close to me, and then tried his hardest to subtly isolate me from everyone I could have trusted. He spent his time studying my every move, while keeping his secrets close to his chest. It's him.

I've been sure of it for a long time."

Sunny tilted his head, trying to digest this new information. After a while, he asked:

"If Caster wanted to kill you, why hasn't he made a move to kill you yet?"

She lingered for a bit, then smiled slightly.

"Because among all of the humans on the Forgotten Shore, he knows what the scions of the Immortal Flame clan are capable of the best. Isn't it ironic? He respects my ability too much to be careless… maybe even fears it. And he can't allow himself to fail. His honor won't allow it. So, Caster won't attack until he is absolutely sure that I won't be able to resist.

He'll make his move when I have no chance to escape."

Sunny scratched the back of his head.

"Let me rephrase that. If Caster wants to kill you, why is he still

alive? Why didn't you kill him already?"

He was sure that if Nephis wanted to, the proud Legacy would have been dead a long time ago.

Changing Star hesitated, and then said in an even tone:

"Because I need him for what is to come. It doesn't matter that he intends to betray me. Traitor or not, he is of use."

Chapter-286: Blessings of the Fire

Some time later, the six of them left the secluded ruin and made their way toward the Bright Castle. The Dark City was silent and bleak, its streets devoid of life and movement. Even the Nightmare Creatures seemed to remain hidden in the lairs today, as though feeling the tension that hung in the air like a harbinger of a disastrous change.

A lonely star was about to ignite in the sky above the cursed city.

Nephis was the first one to walk under the marble arch and step on the road that led to the outer settlement. Her face was calm and motionless, any hint of emotion hidden behind her usual mask of indifference. It was as though she was returning home in triumph, not marching to her own execution.

There was a slightly distant look in her eyes.

Sunny abandoned his usual position at the back of the group and was now walking side by side with her. Maybe it was just a whim, but he felt unwilling to follow in her footsteps as he had always done before, from the first day they met.

As they ascended the tall hill, Changing Star suddenly asked:

"Sunny, do you remember your First Nightmare well?"

Her voice sounded relaxed and idle.

He cast a sideways glance at her and hesitated for a few moments. Then, he answered in an even tone:

"Like it was yesterday."

She smiled slightly.

"Was it hard?"

Slowly, a grin appeared on his face.

"Hard? No, not hard. Impossible. It was a ghastly, despicable, and torturous ordeal. Truly the stuff of nightmares. Calling it hard would be an injustice."

With a dismissive shrug, Sunny drove the memories of the black mountain away and asked:

"...What about yours?"

Nephis looked away, remembering. After a while, she said:

"Mine wasn't that bad, actually."

He stared at her in disbelief.

"What, you only had to kill a measly thousand Unholy Titans with your bare hands, or something like that? Knowing you, "not that bad" means that it was nothing short of a true horror show."

She slowly shook her head.

"...No. I mean it. I didn't have to fight anyone, really. Up until the very end."

Sunny blinked.

"Wait, seriously?"

A strangely sad smile appeared on her lips.

"In my First Nightmare, I was the daughter of a lighthouse keeper. My family lived in a beautiful tower on the shore of a beautiful sea. Every morning, the warm sun rose from beyond the horizon, bathing the endless expanse of azure waves in beautiful light. The winds were gentle and the world was kind. It was me, my parents, and my younger siblings.

We lived together in harmony, humbly but needing for nothing."

He frowned.

"And then what? A sea serpent destroyed the lighthouse? Some rotten horror rose from the depths?"

Changing Star's eyes became distant. A few moments passed before she spoke again:

"No. Nothing happened. That was the point of it, I think. My Nightmare... it was actually a paradise. It was everything I dreamed about when I was a little kid.

Only much more wondrous and human than I could have ever imagined."

Sunny looked at her in utter shock. As he watched, the hint of sorrow disappeared from Neph's face, replaced by a subtly harsh expression.

"But that was what made it so hard to overcome. Impossible, even. Just like you said. Because all I had to do to conquer the Nightmare... all I had to do was to walk away and leave it all behind. Knowing that I could just stay there, in that paradise.

Forever."

He hesitated for a while, then asked cautiously:

"So what did you do?"

A heavy sigh escaped from Neph's lips. Her eyes grew dim.

"...I searched for a way out of the Nightmare for a long time. But no matter how hard I looked, there wasn't any. Day after day, night after night… as time went by, it became harder and harder to force myself to continue searching. I grew accustomed to that bliss, that warm and beautiful life. And eventually, a day came when I thought that, maybe, I should stop. Maybe I can just stay."

She tilted her head slightly and said, her tantalizing voice reaching the deepest, darkest parts of his heart:

"...That was the day I went to the top of the lighthouse. You see, Sunny. You have to light yourself on fire... to reap the blessings of the fire. That was what my grandmother used to say. So that was what I did.

I doused myself in oil, and set myself aflame."

The white flames suddenly licked her hands, and she stared at them, her face slowly turning pale, her eyes reflecting the terrible agony she felt. As her ivory skin continuously boiled, darkened, and then healed to become pristine again, she said simply:

"...And I burned."

Suddenly, the flames disappeared, and she made a fist. Her voice grew a little strained.

"And after a long, long time, when all of it was over... I found myself in a dark cave, nestled in a slimy cocoon of black silk. All around me, thousand upon thousands of people were sleeping in similar cocoons with their eyes open, with happy smiles on their empty faces. And above us… was a creature so revolting and abhorrent that I can't bring myself to describe it to this day.

It was feeding on our dreams."

She grew quiet for a bit, and then added:

"That creature was convulsing in pain, as though it shared in the agony I felt, too. Somehow, I managed to break free of the cocoon. And kill it before it fully regained its senses."

She glanced at him and smiled. However, there was no warmth in that smile.

"...That was how I conquered my First Nightmare."

Sunny looked her in the eyes for a long time, silent. Then, he slowly turned away.

"...Just as I said, the stuff of nightmares. I guess we call them that for a reason."

Changing Star laughed.

"I guess. But really, fighting that Terror wasn't the hardest part. Waking up trapped in a repulsive cocoon wasn't the hardest part. Even... even burning alive wasn't the hardest part."

She grew silent for a few moments and then said, looking at the white road beneath their feet.

"The hardest part was walking up the steps to the top of the lighthouse. Not because of what waited for me in the future, but because of what I was leaving in the past."

...Soon, the familiar shapes of the outer settlement appeared in their sight.

They had finally returned to the Bright Castle.

Chapter-287: Lonely Star

The outer settlement had changed from the time Sunny saw it last.

At the point where the white road widened into the vast platform that the settlement stood upon, a tall stone barricade was built, with watchful sentries observing the approach to the crest of the hill. Each of them was wielding a Memory weapon and a sturdy armor, their faces full of dark determination.

The makeshift watchtower constructed on the roof of Neph's lodge loomed above them, with several archers ready to rain arrows on any Nightmare Creature that wandered close.

The slum itself was much the same, but the people populating it seemed different. Many of them were bruised and bandaged, but their eyes shone with the subtle light of hope that wasn't there or as strong before. That hope was contrasted against the suffocating feeling of tension that hung in the air.

From time to time, someone would glance toward the castle and frown, a dark expression appearing on their face.

There was another detail that surprised Sunny. On the sleeves of many slum dwellers, a piece of pure white cloth was tied, as if announcing their allegiance to some god or goddess.

There had been none of that when he left this place a few months ago.

There were also graffiti drawn on the walls of the most derelict hovels, some of them depicting a shining star, some the image of a beautiful bronze spear.

'...What is that all about?'

The white armbands and the star were, obviously, meant to represent Nephis. But when had Effie suddenly become an apostle?

Glancing at the voracious huntress, he raised an eyebrow.

"Anything you want to tell me?"

She scratched the back of her head, then shrugged.

"I've become a bit of a folk hero, apparently."

Sunny shook his head and didn't press the issue.

'Whatever...'

When the sentries saw who was approaching, their faces first became shocked, and then lighted up with intense jubilation.

"Lady Nephis! It's Changing Star!"

"Lady Nephis has returned!"

"She is alive!"

The hum of voices spread through the entire settlement in an instant. If Gunlaug had not known that they were back in the Dark City, he would have learned of it now.

…But he knew, of course. He knew it long before the people of the slum ever laid their eyes on their supposed savior.

Sunny looked past the outer settlement, at the mighty walls of the Bright Castle.

How long before its Lord throws them a welcome party?

…Soon, the cohort was surrounded by a crowd of exhilarated people. Everyone wanted to see that Saint Nephis was alive and well with their own eyes. The other members were bathing in attention, too. Especially Effie.

"Effie!"

"Huntress Athena!"

"Welcome home, Effie! Show them!"

The huntress grinned in bewilderment and kept quiet.

In the crowd, there were a few faces that did not share in everyone's joy. They were the leaders of the outer settlement's hunting parties. The gazes they threw at Nephis were grim and full of meaning. She gave them a nod, letting the experienced hunters know that she understood the message they were trying to relay.

Then, Changing Star faced the inhabitants of the slum and took the bag that Effie handed her. Slowly unclasping it, she spoke, her calm voice effortlessly making the crowd grow silent.

"I am not good with words, so… please accept my gratitude, Dreamers of the Dark City. The past few months have been harsh on me and the members of my cohort, but they must have been equally as harsh on you. However, we have persevered. You here in these cursed ruins, and we out there in the ghastly depths of the Labyrinth. But all of it was not in vain."

With that, she took something from the bag and tossed it to the ground. Suddenly, a deathly silence settled over the crowd. Everyone was staring at the object laying on the stones, expressions of fear clearly written on many faces.

It was a terrifying, jagged black talon, which was as sharp and long as a sword.

And then, another one fell near it, and another, and another.

Eventually, thirty-eight of these dark blades lay in a pile in front of Nephis — thirty from the six front limbs of the Spire Messenger, and eight from the two hind ones.

Closing the bag, Nephis put it on her shoulder and said, her tone dark and piercing:

"Out there in the Labyrinth, we have fought and slew one of the cursed Messengers of the Crimson Spire. I bring you its claws as a

gift, to become your weapons."

Stunned whispers ran through the crowd. The Messengers were both a symbol of terror and a symbol of hope to the people of the Dark City — terror because of their horrifying power and appetite, as well as their connection to the dreaded Spire, and hope because of the legends that once, a long time ago, a group of powerful Sleepers had managed to kill one.

And now, the legend came alive right in front of their eyes.

Nephis lingered for a moment, and then sighed, a somber note appearing in her voice.

"Many years ago, we, those who were sent to the Forgotten Shore, weren't yet imprisoned by fear. Enthralled by the sin of those cowards who had forgotten that they are, first and forever, humans. Back then, there were people among us willing to risk their lives to conquer this hell. Escape it. The First Lord and his companions were the greatest of them. And now…"

Brilliant sparks of light suddenly appeared around her head like a sacred halo. Changing Star's eyes shined with pure white radiance, and, as the Crown of Dawn weaved itself from light and fell upon her head, she spoke.

She didn't rise or even strain her voice, but the impact of her words only grew because of it.

"...I have brought his legacy back to the Dark City. This is the crown of the First Lord. We have retrieved it from a place of eternal darkness where he had fallen in battle. He died trying to find a way out of this cursed land for all of us to follow."

She paused for a moment and then said, her face illuminated by the brilliant white flames that burned in her furious eyes.

On her forehead, the single gem decorating the Dawn Shard shone with that brilliance, too.

Almost like a third eye.

"And with it, we will finish what he started!"

Chapter-288: Progress Report

Some time later, they entered the stone lodge and found themselves in the middle of another, smaller crowd. Around thirty or forty people gathered in the main hall of Changing Star's dwelling, making it look even smaller than it had before.

However, these were not just any Sleepers from the slum. Most of them were experienced fighters from the outer settlement's few hunting parties, as well as people who Nephis had recruited into her faction during her time in the Dark City.

Back when Sunny had been a part of the group, they were weak and hopeless young men and women who were barely surviving in the cruel reality of the Forgotten Shore. Now, things changed. Neph's little helpers were armed with makeshift weapons and wearing armors fashioned from a wide variety of scavenged materials, while some were even in possession of Memories.

They also held themselves very differently from before.

Honestly, the difference between them and the hunters was not that big now. If Sunny didn't know which were which, he might have mistaken one for the other.

Changing Star walked through the crowd and approached the window that opened on the bleak view of the cursed ruins. She looked at it for a short moment, and then turned around, a dark expression on her face.

"...Tell me."

The leaders of the hunting parties glanced at each other. One of them, a stocky young man with long messy hair and three ugly scars running all the way from his forehead to his chin, spoke with a bit of uncertainty:

"Welcome back, Lady Nephis. It is good that you are alive and well."

She gave him a nod. The hunter paused, then continued, his voice somber:

"We, uh… have followed your orders and advice for these past months. The militia you created has been reinforced and organized to protect the settlement from the attacking monsters. With the Memories you and your cohort hunted for us in the ruins, the casualties were low both among the watchmen and among the civilians. Compared to before, I mean."

Changing Star remained silent and just stared at him. The young man sighed.

"About the other thing… it went almost exactly how you told us it would. Members of the Host came into the settlement shortly after your departure, demanding that Effie surrendered herself to be judged for the disappearance of those Guards. When we told them that she was gone, they got violent. Several people were injured, but no one died."

Effie scoffed. The hunter gave her a complicated look and scratched his cheek.

"After that, they would come again every week or so, hurt a few people and break things, always with the same demand. But we kept our cool and just… well. Took it. Like you told us to do. That seemed to only make them angrier, but they had no real reason to escalate things. In the end, they just settled for making our lives difficult and pushing people around."

The tall huntress shook her head.

"What's with the people foaming at their mouths to greet me? What's that really about?"

The young man looked down in embarrassment and cleared his throat.

"Uh, that… well, you see, the more the Castle proclaimed that you have to answer for the murder of those Guards, the more people in

the settlement became, how do I say this… appreciative of you?"

Effie looked at him with a perplexed expression.

"Because I am beingly unjustly accused?"

He smiled sheepishly.

"Ah, no. Actually, the opposite. They really appreciate the fact that you had… allegedly… killed half a dozen Guards. In fact, their only regret is that you didn't kill more. There are tales about how exactly you dealt with them, too, one more colorful than the other.

The most popular one is that, uh… the Guards wanted to rob you of your, eh, honor, so that's why you had to teach the Castle folks a lesson."

The tall huntress blinked.

"My… honor? Since when do I have honor?"

The young man grinned.

"Hey, don't look at me. I did not come up with this one, alright? Blame Park, it was his idea."

Effie looked darkly at another hunter, who just shrugged.

"Lady Nephis told us to do our best to make people in the settlement root for you. It worked, did it not?"

The unruly huntress rubbed her face with an exasperated expression.

"But... I didn't kill them, though?"

The hunter looked at her with no humor in his eyes.

"Who cares?"

Effie opened her mouth to say something, but Nephis interrupted her:

"Time is short. Don't waste it on useless chatter."

Then, she turned to the hunter with scars on his face and asked:

"What about my last instruction?"

He frowned, then took out a small wooden box from a leather pouch tied to his belt. The young man held the little box like it was the most terrible Nightmare Creature. Handling it with extreme caution, he approached Nephis and handed it to her.

There were drops of sweat on his forehead.

"This... is what the person from the castle brought. I don't know what they used to make Kido create that thing, but the result was exactly as you wished, at least according to the note they left."

He hesitated.

"The box and the note simply appeared on my pillow one day. I almost died of a heart attack when I read what that thing is supposed to be."

Sunny stared at the box with interest. Kido was one of Gunlaug's lieutenants, a young woman in charge of the Artisans. Her Aspect Ability allowed her to manipulate certain qualities of plants, which was of tremendous use here on the Forgotten Shore, where the food was scarce and monotonous.

But what could Nephis want from her that was so important? And why was the hunter so scared of the little box?

Carefully taking it, Changing Star looked at the box for a few moments, and then handed it to Caster.

"You know what to do."

With a short nod, Caster walked toward the door and disappeared.

Nephis, meanwhile, turned to the hunters and said in a steady tone:

"You did well. Thank you, all."

As wide smiles appeared on their faces, she took Effie's bottomless

bag and opened it once again. Turning the bag upside down, Changing Star said:

"This is… not a reward, nor is it a gift. This is just something that all of you deserve, and are going to need very soon."

A moment later, a river of glimmering crystals flowed from the bag, scattering on the table's surface. There were hundreds and hundreds of them, each shining with subtle, alluring light. Soon, the crystal spilled over the edges of the table and fell to the floor.

A few moments later, more than a thousand soul shards appeared before the stunned people who were gathered in the room. The bottomless bag finally ran empty.

Sunny stared at the tall pile of shining crystals and sighed. Back before all of this had started, he had a pile like that of his own... only much, much smaller. His pride and joy.

It was all gone now, sadly.

'What a sight. And I thought I was rich…'

Chapter-289: Start of the Play

Back in the Labyrinth, Sunny wasn't the only one who had killed countless Nightmare Creatures. In fact, due to his primary role as a scout, the three main fighters of the cohort had killed many more.

He knew for a fact that at least two of them — Effie and Caster — had fully saturated their soul cores long before their return journey was finished. Absorbing any more shards would have been useless for them. At some point, Nephis had begun to abstain from consuming her share of the spoils, too.

Added with the shards that Sunny traded for the unwanted Memories that the members of the cohort had accumulated, a truly incredible amount of the alluring crystals had been placed into Effie's leather bag.

He had often wondered what Nephis would use them for, and now, he had his answer.

The people gathered in the main hall of the hunting lodge — her most trusted subordinates — stared at the tall pile of soul shards in utter shock. Here in the Dark City, this was an inconceivable wealth. One shard was enough to buy a person a week of food, comfort, and safety behind the tall walls of the Bright Castle.

Too many had died because they lacked these things. So, in a sense, the mountain of crystals in front of them was tantamount to a thousand human lives.

The scarred hunter slowly tore his eyes away from the glittering shards and looked at Changing Star, his face pale and his voice suddenly raspy:

"What… what is this, Lady Nephis?"

She remained silent for a few moments, and then said in her even, reserved, strangely affecting voice:

"This is for you. To nourish yourselves, and grow stronger. You are going to need every bit of strength for what awaits us in the days to come."

The young man watched her, a dangerous flame slowly igniting in his eyes. A flame of resolve, adoration…

Almost worship.

Hidden in a shadowy corner, Sunny smiled with dark apprehension.

Back at the start of it all, he had told Nephis that Gunlaug could not be defeated because he controlled every facet of life here in the Dark City: food, safety, hope and fear... even power itself.

Then, he had watched as she gave the people of the outer settlement free food, placed them under the protection of her sword, and ignited the embers of the long-forgotten hope in their hearts. All that remained was power.

And now, she had brought them power as well.

No wonder they were ready to worship her. In their eyes, Changing Star was a noble savior.

…No one knew that their messiah was a counterfeit one.

Glancing at the stunned people, Effie sighed and took her bag from Neph's hands. Looking inside the empty Memory with a bit of a sad expression, she said:

"What are you waiting for? Gunlaug's men are probably already arming themselves to come here and break your thick skulls. Share the shards among yourselves and absorb them, dimwits!"

The Sleepers did not make her say it twice.

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Not long after the last shard had been absorbed, one of the watchers ran into the room, breathing heavily

"Coming! They are coming!"

There was a hint of unrestrained fear in her voice.

Sunny flexed his shoulders and stretched.

'The show is about to start.'

The people gathered in the room glanced at each other, their faces full of tension. Only Nephis remained indifferent, watching out of the window at the dead city that sprawled below her like a desolate, lonesome graveyard.

"Stay calm, everyone."

Her voice settled them down. The hunter with scars on his face turned to Changing Star, a deep frown on his face. After hesitating for a few moments, he said:

"But… but… they are coming to take Effie! We can't allow that to happen. I'm done watching good people be taken into the damn Castle and never return. If they want to make an example out of her, like they did with Jubei… over my dead body!"

The hum of angry voices rose in the hall, accompanied by heated glares.

"Exactly!"

"They will pay for Jubei's death!"

"Your dead body? Why not their dead bodies?!"

Nephis lingered for a moment, then turned to them. A slight smile appeared on her face.

"...Don't worry. Nothing is going to happen to Effie. You have my word."

That seemed to calm them down a little. It seemed as though they were willing to believe anything she said, regardless of how impossible her promises were. Was that the definition of blind faith?

Before anyone could answer, however, a crashing sound came from the direction of the entrance to the stone lodge. It seemed as though someone had just smashed through the door.

There was a short scream, which quickly grew silent. Something fell on the floor.

Then, the sound of heavy footsteps could be heard, drawing closer to the hall where all the people had gathered. A few moments later, its door was shattered, too, exploding into a shower of splinters along with the bits of stone that surrounded it.

A giant of a man walked into the hall, his mere presence making the entire space look tiny. Compared to him, even Effie seemed to be of average height. There was a morose expression on his face and a dark glint in his cold, cruel eyes.

The giant did not wear any armor, allowing his monumental muscles to strain the fabric of a sleeveless silk shirt.

It appeared that Tessai, the fearsome leader of the Castle Guard, had decided to welcome the cohort back to the Dark City himself. Neph's followers paled, their fiery indignation replaced by fear.

'What a monster,' Sunny thought indifferently, pondering on what the quickest way to kill the morose giant would be.

Behind Tessai, a group of Guards, each wearing a sturdy armor and wielding Memory weapons, could be seen. Their eyes were immediately drawn to the robust figure of the tall huntress, and then, hateful smiles appeared on their faces. The Guards seemed very happy to finally find the woman accused of murdering their own.

The giant only glanced at Effie and then turned to Nephis. His deep, low voice resounded in the stone hall, sending shivers running through the hearts of many Sleepers gathered there.

"Changing Star. So you're alive after all."

She met his gaze and endured it without flinching.

"You must be Tessai. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

The giant lingered before answering. The corner of his mouth twitched and slowly curled upward. Finally, he said:

"Oh, no. The pleasure is all mine."

Then, he raised his mighty arm and pointed at Effie.

"Lord Gunlaug has invited this one to the Castle, to face punishment for her crimes. You should have trained your dogs better, Changing Star. See what happens when they go around biting people?"

He lowered his hand and flexed his shoulders, then looked at her with a dark expression.

"Now. I would advise you rats to step aside and let me take that she-wolf with me."

Nephis crossed her arms and stared at the giant, cold sparks igniting in the depths of her calm grey eyes. A few moments later, she said evenly:

"...Or what?"

Chapter-290: Judgment Day

Changing Star's words brought the room to dead silence. On both sides of it, people were slowly preparing themselves, dark resentment burning in their eyes. It felt as though the tension reached critical mass and was about to explode into a storm of violence.

Only three people remained calm and unaffected by the direness of the situation: Nephis herself, Sunny… and Tessai.

The giant bared his canines in a grin. His eyes, however, remained cold as ice.

"What a… revelation. And here I was, thinking that you are a great defender of justice. Were you not, Changing Star? Or is your sense of justice reserved only for the crimes of those who don't serve you?"

He sighed and added, his voice full of disappointment:

"That huntress of yours is accused of murder. Why are you trying to prevent me from bringing her to justice? I thought that you, of all people, would not get in the way of fairness."

Nephis frowned.

"Accused does not mean convicted. Why do you claim that she is guilty?"

Tessai stared at her and said, his low voice sending tremors through the stone hall:

"There is plenty of evidence. There are plenty of witnesses. So many people came forward to give a testimony! Her guilt is undeniable. How will you answer that, Changing Star?"

Sunny smiled slightly.

'How peculiar. So many people apparently saw Effie slaughter those fools. Did I imagine killing them or what? I was a bit crazy at the time, to be fair. Ha.'

Before Nephis could answer, Kai suddenly took a step forward and shouted:

"That is impossible! I…"

However, she made him stop with a stern look. The charming young man hesitated, then gritted his teeth and fell silent, glaring at Tessai with burning indignation.

Changing Star turned to the imposing giant and smiled.

"...Well, well. That changes everything, then. Please forgive me, if you can. I have been away from the Dark City for so long, and wasn't informed of these… developments. If this is the case, then by all means, take her away."

Effie grimaced and looked at her with an amused expression. Sunny did not take his eyes off of Tessai, however, his shadow stared at Nephis, too.

The smile suddenly disappeared from her face, replaced by boundless coldness.

"...However, I am coming with her. All of us are, in fact. We are awfully curious to see that evidence and hear those witnesses. And, most of all, we are all dying to see justice done and those guilty punished. Surely, Lord Gunlaug would not mind."

An expression of dissatisfaction appeared on Tessai's face. With a deep frown, he looked down on Neph from his oppressive height and said in a growling voice:

"Why do you think that you can come, wench?"

Changing Star was silent for a few moments, calmly looking at him. Then, her eyes suddenly shone with furious white light. In a voice that promised agony and death, she said with contempt:

"...Who's going to stop me?"

The giant stared at her with a complicated expression. It seemed as though he was being torn between pride… and fear.

It was all a mask, though. A masterful performance to hide his true emotions…

Triumph and jubilation.

He had come here with the excuse of bringing Effie to justice, but his true goal had always been Nephis. She was the one Gunlaug wanted to destroy. And now, she was bringing herself to him, like a lamb going to slaughter.

What Tessai did not know was that Changing Star was as far from a lamb as one could be.

'...More like a demon in sheep's clothing.'

Sunny glanced at the morose giant with something that resembled pity. Meanwhile, Tessai slowly shook his head and said, his voice full of false reluctance:

"...Fine. Do as you wish. Come with me to the Castle, if you want. Bring your rats with you. All of you will witness the brilliance of our Lord!"

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All together, they exited the lodge. Tessai was walking in the front, holding the tall huntress by the shoulder. Her hands were tied behind her back with a flimsy rope — more of a symbolic gesture than a real restraint, considering Effie's strength. Nephis was keeping close, her face calm and indifferent.

The Guards and the members of Changing Star's faction were right behind them, throwing menacing looks at each other. Their faces were grim and full of resentful indignation. Sunny had hidden himself in the crowd, not wishing to draw any attention. Now, he was moving with it, feeling the restless agitation through the chaotic movement of the surrounding shadows.

As they moved toward the Castle, more and more slum dwellers surrounded them, their faces full of shock and anger.

"They got Effie!"

"Bastards! Let her go!"

"Lady Nephis! Do something!"

Glancing at the growing number of people who were gathering around them, she smiled reassuringly and said:

"Stay calm! Come with us if you want. Today, we'll see justice done!"

However, her appeal to remain calm had the opposite effect on the crowd. It ignited it instead, and soon, a clamor of shouts rose above the outer settlement:

"Justice! Justice!"

…However, at some point, the tone of it changed, an almost palpable sense of bloodlust finding its way into the people's voices. The word they were shouting was also replaced, and soon, the crowd was chanting something else. Calling not for justice, but for…

Judgment.

"Judgment! Judgment!"

Sunny observed the raging beast of the human crowd with a troubled frown. A cold, familiar emotion grasped his heart. He knew this sickening feeling all too well.

It was the same way he felt when facing frenzied Nightmare Creatures.

'Hell...'

As they drew close to the stairs leading to the entrance of the castle, almost a hundred people were following them. The Guards standing at the gates stared at the crowd with a bit of fear in their eyes.

…And at some point, Caster appeared out of nowhere and took position right behind Nephis. The proud Legacy looked pale and a bit disheveled, but it seemed that he had managed to complete the mysterious task given to him by Changing Star without receiving any wounds.

A few moments later, they entered the Bright Castle.

Chapter-291: Eye of the Storm

The crowd poured into the castle, their faces contorted with anger and resentment. However, as soon as the slum dwellers passed beneath the swaying skulls that hung above the gates, their fury turned cold.

In the echoing stone halls of the Bright Castle, it was hard to forget that Gunlaug's power was absolute. For as long as any of them remembered, he had ruled over the Dark City with an iron fist, elevating those who bowed to him and destroying those who did not.

Countless men and women had tried to challenge the Bright Lord in the past… great people, terrible people, and everyone in-between. It was their skulls that now stared at the crowd, darkness nesting in their eyes.

Finally, doubt and fear appeared in the hearts of the inhabitants of the outer settlement. Many of them stared at Nephis, their faces turning dim and listless.

Changing Star did not react to this sudden change in one way or another. Looking straight ahead, she calmly walked forward, an indifferent expression on her face. Her usual mask was in its place once again, preventing anyone from knowing her true thoughts.

Trying to remain unnoticed, Sunny made his way to the front of the crowd to be closer to Nephis, Effie, and Caster. No one paid him any attention. In the grand scheme of things, people thought of him as an insignificant piece, if at all.

Just like he wanted them to.

From his point of view, the atmosphere in the Bright Castle seemed to be a bit strange, and not because of the invading horde of slum dwellers. Its halls and corridors were too empty, too lifeless. He didn't

see any people hurrying on their daily business, as they always would. Even the opulent desk in the entrance hall was empty, the clerk usually present behind it absent for some reason.

'Where is everyone?'

His question was soon answered.

Entering the throne room, he saw hundreds of Sleepers standing along its walls, waiting to meet them. It seemed as though the whole population of the Bright Castle had gathered here. There were the Guards, the Hunters, the Artisans, the quiet Handmaidens. Even people who paid tribute to remain in the Castle were all there.

Sunny noticed a few familiar faces. Stev, the large man in charge of the Memory Market, stood uncomfortably near the members of the Host. There was also Aiko, the owner of the gambling den, and many others whom he remembered from his brief stay in the Castle.

The air was tense and heavy. It seemed that not all of these people had come to the throne room of their own free will. Many of them had troubled, frightened expressions on their faces. Others were relaxed and joyful, waiting for an entertaining show with dark fascination burning in their eyes.

What disturbed him the most were the several figures of Nightmare Creatures standing among the humans. Those were the Echoes belonging to the inhabitants of the Castle, each one more terrifying that the other.

'...Why are they out of their owners' Soul Seas?'

On the raised dais at the far end of the great hall, illuminated by the false stars that were carved into the wall of the dark alcove, the four lieutenants of the Bright Lord stood. There was Gemma, the leader of the Hunters, Kido, the chief Artisan, and Seishan, who was in charge of the Handmaidens.

…and Harus, of course.

Sunny stared at the dreadful hunchback, who just stood there with his usual bored expression, looking at the wall.

He was pretty sure that today, at least one of them was going to die.

As if feeling his gaze, Harus suddenly turned and glanced at Sunny. This time, however, Sunny did not look away. He stared straight into the hunchback's glassy eyes, a calm and calculating expression on his face.

'I wonder how he killed all those people without being seen even once. With so many victims, somebody had to catch a glimpse of this butcher hard at work. What Aspect Ability does he possess? How do I counter it?'

Harus stared at him for a few moments, then tilted his head and smiled with strange amusement. A second later, he turned away and looked at the wall again, seemingly losing all interest.

Meanwhile, Tessai walked to the middle of the hall and threw Effie down, forcing her to kneel on the floor. Then, he gave Nephis a dark look and joined the other lieutenants on the steps leading to the throne.

The two hundred or so slum dwellers were standing at one end of the throne room, their faces grim and full of dark apprehension. With the exception of those directly serving Changing Star, most of them were dressed in dirty rags, with only a few wearing a proper armor.

Some were unarmed, some had Memories or makeshift weapons hanging on their belts, and some even had swords hastily fashioned out of the talons of the slain Spire Messenger.

Opposite them, with their back to the throne, stood the people of the castle. Many of them looked like they didn't want to be here, but more had contempt and indignation in their eyes. Those were mostly the members of the Host, who were more than two hundred people strong. Each of them was clad in a sturdy Memory armor and wielded enchanted weapons.

They were strong, well-fed, and experienced in combat.

The hunters, especially, were a formidable presence despite their comparatively small number. They were looking at Nephis with

intense hatred, the memory of her killing one of their own in this very hall still fresh in their minds.

Changing Star stood beside Effie in the middle of the empty space between the two groups, looking at the white throne. Her ivory face was cold and indifferent, and her silver hair glinted in the rays of sunshine that fell through tall windows. Sparks of light were dancing in the depths of her calm grey eyes.

She was the focal point of everyone's attention and the target of the dark storm of emotions that raged between the ancient walls of the Castle today.

If it bothered her, she did not show it.

And then, finally, the Bright Lord himself appeared.

Sunny knew that Gunlaug entered the great hall even before seeing him. He knew it because of the sudden change in the people that surrounded him. It was as though a wave of invisible pressure had crashed into the crowd, forcing them to groan and bend, almost buckling to the ground.

Their legs trembled, their faces paled, and drops of sweat appeared on their skin, as well as fear and panic in their eyes.

The mastermind behind this ghoulish spectacle had finally arrived.

Chapter-292: Just Cause

Gunlaug looked just like the last time Sunny had seen him.

…Like a golden demon born of some harrowing hell.

The Bright Lord was tall and had broad, powerful shoulders. His body was clad in a strange armor that seemed to be made out of molten gold. It was both solid and liquid, flowing over his mightly muscles and covering him from head to toe.

Not even Gunlaug's eyes were exposed.

In the place where his face should have been, there was nothing but a smooth and empty expanse of polished gold. The great hall of the Bright Castle reflected in it, and all the people gathered there did, too.

As soon as Sunny saw the golden mask, he felt the oppressive aura that radiated from the Bright Lord. Even knowing what was going to happen, he couldn't help but shake a little and bite his lip.

The mind assault of the golden armor was truly hard to endure. Even with the protection of the Puppeteer's Shroud, he felt it pressing on him, making it hard to breathe. Deep inside, a primal, bestial fear was clawing at his heart.

But this fear did not belong to him. It was fake. With a dark grimace, Sunny strangled it and made it disappear.

Walking out of the darkness of the alcove like a golden apparition, Gunlaug glanced at the mass of people below him and sat on the throne. His pose was relaxed and casual, as though he was here to leisurely resolve a trivial matter, not decide someone's fate.

Hundreds of fates, perhaps.

However, despite his laid-back attitude, everyone gathered in the great hall swayed a little, pressed down to the ground by the incredible force of his presence.

The Bright Lord lingered for a few moments, and then said, his serpentine voice full of mirth:

"Ah, what a sight. All my precious wards gathered here, united in the desire to see justice prevail. This dedication, this fervor for the rule of law… oh, it just makes my blood boil with appreciation. Don't you think it's wonderful?"

He laughed and turned his head slightly, peering directly at Nephis. She lowered her head a bit, an almost imperceptible tremor running through her body. To Sunny, though, it seemed as though the plates of marble beneath her feet were about to crack from the terrifying pressure of Gunlaug's gaze.

Nevertheless, she endured it without showing much of the tremendous strain she was under.

The Bright Lord paused and then echoed his words, a note of some dark emotion finding its way into his voice:

"Don't you think it's wonderful, Changing Star of the Immortal Flame clan?"

Nephis gritted her teeth, struggling to remain steady under the psychic onslaught of the golden armor. When she finally answered, her voice sounded suppressed:

"...Indeed."

Gunalug remained silent for a bit. Although his face was hidden behind the golden mask, Sunny had a feeling that he was smiling.

Finally, he spoke:

"How nice. Somehow, I was under the impression that you would disagree. I've been told by my most loyal aids that you are a disagreeable person. I guess you just can't trust anyone these days."

With that, he glanced at his lieutenants, making them pale and shiver.

Sunny shivered, too. The message hidden in those words was clear: Gunlaug was letting Nephis know that he had known that she had a spy among the highest ranks of his people all along.

And didn't care. Maybe even silently allowed it to happen.

'Damnation…'

How much did he know?

Finally, the Bright Lord looked at Effie. After a few seconds had passed in tense silence, he spoke to her with a hint of sadness:

"We meet again, Effie. What a shame that it is in these tragic circumstances. If only you had listened to me and joined the Host… perhaps then you might not have fallen so low. Such pity…"

He shook his head and sighed.

"I had high hopes for you. But, alas… murdering innocent humans is not something that can be forgiven. Look at yourself! Instead of a noble Hunter, you have turned into a wild beast. But that is what happens when people refuse my grace. They become no better than Nightmare Creatures."

His somber words echoed in the silence of the great hall, making people lower their gazes.

Effie trembled, pressed down by the force of his undivided attention. But then, she grinned and answered, her raspy voice sounding relaxed and carefree.

She only said two words:

"Fuck off."

Gunlaug laughed and raised his hands in a helpless gesture.

"I rest my case. You all see how unrepentant this vile murderer is.

There's not a drop of remorse left in her corrupted, rotten soul. That is why, with a heavy heart, I have to sentence this once-promising young woman to death. She has to answer for her crimes, and leaving her alive would put you, my wards, in danger. I am left with no choice."

A hum of voices rose from the crowd. Slum dweller or an inhabitant of the Castle, everyone was affected by his last words:

"Don't you dare, bastard!"

"Kill that murderer!"

"Effie! We're here!"

"Make her pay!"

"Lady Nephis! You can't let them!"

"Kill her!"

"Kill all of them!"

Unaffected by this outburst of boiling emotions, Nephis put a hand on Effie's shoulder and looked at the Bright Lord with a cold expression. Staring directly at the golden mask, she frowned and said, her voice clear and loud:

"I object."

The storm of voices suddenly grew quiet. Everyone turned to her, two kinds of expectation hiding in their eyes.

One was full of hope. The other full of vicious glee.

Gunlaug tilted his head.

"Object? What do you mean? Her guilt has been proven without any room left for doubt. There is nothing you can do to change the outcome."

He paused for a moment and then suddenly leaned forward, his

insidious voice washing over the great hall like a wave:

"Well. Unless, of course…"

Changing Star looked at him with dark resolve and lowered her chin stubbornly.

Then, she said:

"I want to invoke the right of challenge."

Chapter-293: The Challenge

An echoing silence fell on the great hall of the ancient castle. The fateful words had been spoken, and now there was no turning back.

For better or for worse.

Gunlaug tilted his head and stayed quiet for a few moments. Then, the sound of his laughter rolled over the crowd.

"The right of challenge? Oh, that old thing. You are awfully fond of that tradition, it seems. Not even a full year since you have arrived under my roof, and I had the pleasure of hearing you say those words twice. Insolent girl…"

He paused for a few moments and then leaned forward. His voice suddenly turned cold, full of dark undertones.

"To be honest, I am very tired of your insolence, Changing Star."

Before Nephis could answer, the Bright Lord suddenly rose from his throne, towering above the crowd like a statue cast from pure gold. Then, he took a leisurely step forward and began descending the stairs of the dais. With each step, the sound of his serpentine voice resounded, growing lower and lower, until it turned into a fiendish, wrathful growl.

"Your little games were fun at first, but the more I observed your clumsy attempts at playing the hero, the more disgusted I became. I couldn't believe how naive, self-righteous, and stupid you turned out to be. It made me sick. It made me want to do things that I promised myself to never do again. Ah, I expected better from the daughter of the Immortal Flame! To disappoint me so thoroughly…"

His growl reverberated through the great hall and then abruptly disappeared. A moment later, Gunlaug suddenly threw his head back

and laughed brightly.

"Oh, but then it hit me! I was such a fool. You fooled me so beautifully! Brilliantly done, Changing Star. Please, do accept my compliment! After I saw the real you, ah, it was such a joy to watch your performances."

He left the stairs and stepped on the marble floor of the throne room. The crowd of the Castle inhabitants parted in front of him, people hurrying to get as far away from the oppressive aura of the golden armor as they could.

The Bright Lord sighed.

"It's such a shame that all of this will have to stop now. You see… while I can't help but applaud your effort, in the end, you still turned out to be just another fool."

He glanced at Effie and asked, his voice full of mockery:

"A challenge? I don't think it's your place to demand such a thing. You are not the one accused of the crime, after all. If someone has to invoke the right of challenge, it should be Effie herself. Don't you think?"

Nephis gritted her teeth, struggling to remain poised under the assault of the psychic pressure. Refusing to turn away from the polished mirror of the Bright Lord's face, she said:

"...It's just like one of your minions said. I am responsible for the actions of my people. Any crime they commit… is my crime."

Gunlaug watched her, his expression hidden. Neph's pale face was reflected in his mask, staring back at her with merciless grey eyes. After a while, he spoke:

"Sound logic. Who are you going to challenge, then?"

She hesitated for a few moments, then said steadily:

"Whoever it was that passed the guilty verdict."

The Bright Lord chuckled.

"Oh? But by the same logic... that would be me."

She smiled darkly and glared at him, white flames dancing in her eyes.

"Then you are the one I challenge!"

Her words resounded in the great hall, sending hundreds of people gathered there into a state of stunned shock.

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'So, this is it.'

Sunny looked at the crowd of stunned people, mentally separating them into two groups. Those who were going to be a threat and those who were not.

Regardless of how the fight between Nephis and Gunlaug ended, the small enclave of humans living in the Dark City was going to descend into utter chaos. If Changing Star was killed, her followers would make her into a martyr and go insane. The Host would not just let them off, either. If the Bright Lord fell…

No matter how much of a bastard Gunlaug was, he was also the glue that held this whole place together. Without a tyrant enforcing some semblance of order, no matter how ghoulish, things would get really ugly really fast. Who was going to stop the Nightmare Creatures from wiping the humans out then?

In any case, there was going to be a bloodbath.

But he was done worrying about these matters. In the upcoming mayhem, Sunny's goals were very simple.

Remain alive. Protect Nephis. Make sure that she becomes the new tyrant of the Dark City.

...So that she could carve the way back to reality for a few lucky survivors. If she doesn't die right here and now, of course.

In the silence that enveloped the great hall, the Bright Lord laughed and tilted his head, staring at Changing Star from behind his golden mask. Then, he said:

"How audacious! I wonder what gives you the confidence to dare challenge me. Various people have tried to kill me, you know. I have a little hobby, actually — collecting their skulls. Come to think of it, your pretty head would look really well in my collection."

Suddenly, he raised a hand and gestured to his forehead:

"Don't tell me… don't tell me that it's all because of that little toy that you took off the First Lord's corpse? Oh, no! That would be terrible. You didn't really think that one powerful Memory would be enough to defeat me?"

Nephis lingered for a while, glaring at Gunlaug. Then, she said evenly:

"My bare hands would be enough to defeat a worm like you. The Memory is just to make it quicker."

Gunlaug stared at her for a moment, and then chuckled.

"Great! This is great! Such spirit! I will really enjoy breaking you, Changing Star. When this is done."

He flexed his shoulders and said, his voice sending shivers into the hearts of hundreds of people gathered in the hall:

"Alright. I accept your challenge."

Chapter-294: Song of Steel

The great hall of the Bright Castle grew silent and still. However, that stillness was not tranquil, but like a predator that fell low to the ground, ready to explode into a violent lunge to tear its prey apart.

The Sleepers pressed themselves against the walls, giving Changing Star and the Bright Lord space for their battle. Effie was dragged away from the middle of the hall by two Guards, and now, there was nothing but emptiness separating the two fighters.

From one side of the hall, the five lieutenants — Gemma, Tessai, Kido, Seishan, and Harus — were looking at their master with complicated emotions. On the other side of it, Kai, Caster, and the leaders of the outer settlement hunting parties were doing the same. Cassie was also there, her hand resting on the hilt of the Quiet Dancer. There was a grim, somber expression on her beautiful face.

Sunny glanced at the blind girl, and then turned to the center of the throne room.

Two people were standing opposite each other there. One was a tall man encased in a strange golden carapace that followed the lines of his mighty body. The other was a young woman in an elegant plate armor forged of white metal.

There was a subtle similarity between them. Both were emanating a striking, compelling sense of power and confidence that very few people ever possessed. Both were fearsome and deadly. Both were at the apex of their kind.

However, this was where the similarity ended.

'This… doesn't look good,' Sunny thought, evaluating the two fighters.

He knew better than anyone what Nephis was capable of, but even then, the sight of her facing Gunlaug made a deep scowl appear on his face.

The Bright Lord was much taller than her and weighed probably twice as much as Changing Star. He was stronger, had longer reach, and much more experience in slaughtering people.

That was not even considering that damned golden armor of his.

Even with the miraculous augmentation of the Dawn Shard, Neph's silver sword could barely be considered at the same power level as an Ascended weapon would have been. That was still a whole rank below Gunlaug's strange Echo.

Trying to break through that armor was going to be as hard as cracking the shell of a carapace centurion with a sword forged from mundane steel. Incredibly hard, if not impossible. And unlike the carapace of a scavenger, the golden Echo did not seem to have a weak spot.

At that moment, sparks of light appeared in the air in front of Changing Star. The silver longsword appeared in her hand, and she pointed it to the ground… for now.

'What weapon is that bastard going to use?'

That would decide a lot. Sunny was sure that Gunlaug possessed an arsenal of powerful Memory weapons... but how powerful were they exactly?

He glanced at the Bright Lord, expecting to see the same sparks swirling around his hands. However, there was none.

Instead, the liquid gold flowed forward and assumed the shape of a heavy battle axe, which Gunlaug then grasped and leisurely put on his shoulder. The polished mirror of his mask reflected the slight frown that appeared on Neph's face.

'Dammit.'

The weapon the Bright Lord was going to use was also a part of his

Echo, and as such, possessed the quality of a Transcended weapon. It was going to cut through the Starlight Legion Armor without much effort.

'This is even worse than I imagined…'

As Sunny gritted his teeth, Gunlaug said in a serpentine, insidious voice:

"Any last words, Changing Star?"

Nephis tilted her head a little and remained silent for a while. Her helmet weaved itself from strings of light, hiding her face completely, with only calm grey eyes visible through the crack of the visor. Finally, she answered with only one word, her usually even voice full of furious contempt:

"...Traitor."

A wave of whispers spread through the crowd. People were guessing what exactly she meant by that, but Sunny suspected that he was the only one who knew.

Neph wasn't accusing Gunlaug of betraying his fellow humans or causing the deaths of numerous young men and women. She was accusing him of betraying the true duty of the Awakened and submitting to the Nightmare Spell instead of fighting it to the bitter end.

In her mind, that was a far greater crime.

The only crime, even.

The Bright Lord laughed.

"That's too bad. I heard that one before…"

And then, without wasting even a fraction of a second, he suddenly exploded forward in a terrifying, lightning-fast lunge.

The shift between peace and violence was so instant and swift that most people gathered in the great hall did not even realize what was

happening until a few moments later.

With each of Gunlaug's strides, the floor of the throne room shook a little. He flew at Nephis like a furious giant made of gold, swinging his battle axe with both incredible agility and horrible force.

She barely reacted in time, shifting her body and raising the sword to deflect the killing blow to the side. However, then something unexpected happened.

The shaft of the battle axe suddenly elongated, the liquid gold comprising it flowing forward to assume a new shape. As a result, her deflection ended up being almost useless.

With an awkward stagger, Changing Star reeled back. The very edge of the battle axe's blade bit into the helmet of the Starlight Legion Armor and effortlessly cleaved through it, leaving a shallow cut on her cheek. In the next moment, Gunlaug's foot crashed into her ribs, sending the young woman flying through the air.

Nephis landed in a roll and used one hand to stop herself from sliding on the marble floor. As drops of blood fell from beneath her helmet, merciless white flames ignited in her eyes.

A moment later, she jumped forward and met the onslaught of the Bright Lord with an equal amount of fury.

The deadly song of clashing steel resounded in the ancient hall...

Like a promise of much greater bloodshed yet to come.

Chapter-295: The Duel

The breastplate of Neph's armor cracked from the force of Gunlaug's blow and there was blood streaming from beneath her helmet, but that didn't slow Changing Star one bit.

Jumping forward to meet the Bright Lord's assault, she dodged the blade of the battle axe, twisted, and tried to deliver a strike of her own. A furious clangor of metal exploded in the silence of the great hall, both fighters moving with incredible speed, precision, and skill.

In a span of several seconds, they exchanged numerous blows, but each was either deflected, dodged, or blocked. This terrifying clash was not at all like Sunny had imagined. There was nothing elegant, graceful, or elevated about it — all there was was barbarous violence and cruel brutality, each of the fighters doing everything in their power to break, cripple and kill their opponent.

Their voices sounded like that of wild beasts, partially from the incredible strain of the duel, but also to let out the suffocating bloodlust and murderous intent that were drowning their minds.

That was not to say that any one of them had lost control of their thoughts and actions. Both were cold-blooded killers and knew how to remain calm in the throes of the most terrible rage.

A few seconds later, Gunlaug and Nephis disengaged and staggered away from each other, letting the spectators draw in shaky breaths.

The Bright Lord's golden armor was pristine and unscathed. Nephis, however, had several bloody cuts on her body, the black material encompassing it torn and ripped. Another crack appeared on one of her pauldrons. She glanced at it briefly and then indifferently turned back to watch her enemy.

Everyone in the throne room, in one way or another, was thinking

about the same thing, a cold and sickening feeling slowly spreading through their chests. How would they fare in such a fight themselves? The answer was simple — they would have been long dead, eviscerated in mere seconds by one of these awesome fighters.

Everyone felt death breathing down their necks.

Among all the people watching their fight, however, there were two who observed Changing Star's every move with a special kind of attention. They were Sunny and Caster.

Their reasons for studying how Nephis fought were entirely different, but also almost the same.

…Just a second of rest, and the two fighters lunged at each other once again. This time, however, their behavior was different.

The first clash was just a test to gauge what the enemy was capable of. Now, they were not holding anything back, throwing everything they had at the enemy.

At least that was how it seemed.

Changing Star's sword suddenly flashed with brilliant radiance. Removing one hand from the hilt, she grasped the incandescent blade with her armored gauntlet at the middle to better control its tip and raised it to shoulder level. With Gunlaug's ability to change the length of his weapon at will and almost impregnable armor, this grip was more advantageous.

The Bright Lord absorbed the battle axe back into his armor. Then, two straight blades grew out of his forearms, creating weapons that resembled long, heavy punching daggers.

They clashed once again, this time with even more fury. The people pressing themselves into the walls of the throne room trembled.

Nephis seemed to abandon a lot of her defense, willing to take much bigger risks to obliterate the enemy. The reach of her sword was much shorter now, but the silver blade also grew much more agile and unpredictable. Gunlaug's daggers were a true menace to resist, however.

They flew at her from all sides, either in tandem or in a staggered rhythm, making it hard for the young woman to predict and deflect each blow.

But she wasn't trying to.

Changing Star seemed willing to receive many shallow wounds to get a chance to land a strike on her opponent. More bloody lacerations appeared on her body, the Starlight Legion Armor barely holding together.

But she achieved her goal, in the end.

Catching one of Gunlaug's daggers between the blade of her sword and her body, she forcefully twisted the sword sideways and caused him to turn his torso. Then, Nephis sidestepped and suddenly appeared behind the Bright Lord, with a fraction of a second left before he could turn around and defend himself.

Her incandescent sword finished its arc high above her head, and, changing back to the standard grip, she brought it down with all her strength on Gunlaug's shoulder.

The radiant white blade flashed through the air and bit into the golden armor.

...And then, it slid fruitlessly off its bright surface, not leaving even a scratch on it.

'Damn it all!'

In the next moment, Gunlaug threw the sword to the side with one arm and delivered a terrifying blow with the other, his dagger aimed at Neph's face. She managed to turn her head at the last moment, avoiding instant death, but was still caught by the enemy's fist.

The impact was so strong that Changing Star was thrown backward several meters. The helmet had shattered completely, revealing a pale, bloodied face, with bits of metal piercing the skin. She rolled several times and came to a stop, then rose to her feet with some effort. The white flames dimmed a little, and there was a dark, disoriented emotion in her eyes.

The gem of the Dawn Shard shone gently right above them, illuminating Neph's wounded face.

A moment later, she dismissed what little remained of the helmet and stared at Gunlaug with resentment, blood running from the cuts on her cheeks.

The Bright Lord laughed and made a step toward Changing Star, his voice echoing under the roof of the great hall like a death sentence.

"What? That was all?"

Nephis did not answer. Instead, she placed both hands on the blade of her sword, holding it with its hilt and crossguard up, like a makeshift mace.

The radiance of the silver sword spread to encompass all of it.

But it didn't stop there.

Sunny opened his eyes wide.

'What?!'

The furious white flames spread from the sword to Changing Star's hands, her arms, and then devoured her figure completely.

But they weren't burning in the white, cracked metal of the Starlight Legion Armor.

Instead, the brilliant radiance was emanating from her skin.

Chapter-296: Creature of Light

Sunny stared at the shining figure in front of him, a myriad of thoughts appearing in his mind.

With her skin emanating blinding white radiance, Nephis looked beautiful and pure, as though untouched by the imperfections of the mundane world. Wreathed in light, she was like a heavenly angel that descended into the mortal realm.

The sight of it was both breathtaking and terrifying.

…It was also eerily similar to the image of the radiant creature he had seen on the walls of the ancient mine. Especially with the gem of the Dawn Shard burning on Neph's forehead like a third eye.

But that wasn't what gave Sunny pause.

'How is this possible?!'

But then, why wouldn't it be possible?

At the start of their journey, he had guessed that Changing Star's Aspect was of the Divine rank, just like his. Her powers seemed to be able to either augment Memories or heal, while his own could be used to scout, enhance Memories, or augment Sunny himself.

Because Nephis had never used the white flames to achieve that last effect, he had assumed that she was incapable of doing so, and thus her Aspect, while powerful, was less versatile.

But augmenting herself was exactly what Neph was doing right now. Sunny knew it instantly — she wrapped her body in light just like he had wrapped his own body in the shadow countless times. With this enhancement, her physical prowess had to grow exponentially.

Had she always been capable of doing so and hid that facet of her Aspect intentionally, or was this something she learned how to do only after growing more powerful and absorbing hundreds upon hundreds of soul shards in the Labyrinth?

That question was going to remain unanswered, at least for now. Because the battle between Changing Star and the Bright Lord was far from over.

Just like Sunny suspected, with her body wreathed in light, Nephis suddenly became much stronger and faster. If before she was visibly weaker and slower than Gunlaug, even if not by much, now, it seemed the other way around. She dashed toward the enemy, batted away one of the daggers, and delivered a crushing blow right to the polished mirror mask.

This time, there was a slight mark left on the surface of the golden armor by her sword.

The two of them became locked in a ferocious battle, dozens of attacks flying at each fighter. The clangor of metal grew in volume, turning into an almost deafening cacophony. Changing Star was fighting with abandon, more and more wounds accumulating on her radiant body. However, she also managed to land several more blows, each striking at the golden mirror of the Bright Lord's face.

Slowly, a hint of a crack started to appear on its surface.

Sunny also noticed that her wounds weren't healing. It seemed as if Nephis was only capable of supporting two effects at the same time — one augmenting her sword, the other her body. To summon the healing power of the white flame, she had to sacrifice one or the other.

But she was unwilling to.

A few moments later, it seemed as though Gunlaug was slowly starting to lose ground. His enemy was just too fast, powerful, and ferocious. More and more strikes landed on the golden armor, and although it seemed to hold, for now, it was clear that the continuous blows were taking a toll on both the Bright Lord and his Echo.

…However, the Golden Serpent had a few tricks up his sleeve, too.

When the momentum of the fight began to favor Nephis, he suddenly chuckled and turned his face to catch her reflection in the mirror mask.

A second later, the sound of muffled groans could be heard escaping from the mouths of hundreds of people. The psychic pressure emanated by the Bright Lord suddenly increased manyfold, throwing some people to the ground and making others stagger. Sunny saw blood flowing from people's noses, eyes, and mouths.

He himself also felt it and gritted his teeth, struggling to remain standing. He almost failed.

Changing Star, who was at the center and the true target of the mental assault, let out a pained yelp and staggered.

…That was the moment when Gunlaug stepped forward and stabbed her through the chest with one of his daggers.

As the long blade pierced the lithe body of the young woman and exited from her back, he said in a calm and friendly voice:

"There, there. That's enough. Go die now, stupid girl."

Then, he twisted the dagger, making her scream once again.

Nephis stared at him, blood flowing from her mouth. Then, she raised her sword and hit him in the face with the pommel, again and again, until a small crack finally appeared on the surface of the mirror mask.

But the crushing wave of mental pressure did not go away. Instead, it only increased.

Gunalug laughed.

"Are you done? No? Well, let me help you then…"

His second dagger flashed through the air, slashing Nephis across the wrist. With the tendons cut, the silver sword fell from her hand, its

radiance dimming.

Nephis used her other hand to push the Bright Lord away and slid off the blade of the dagger, then staggered away, eventually falling to her knees. The white radiance emanated from her body grew brighter, and the wound on her body began to heal. A low groan escaped from her lips.

Gunalug approached the kneeling young woman, laughing.

"Did you think I wouldn't know about that little trick of yours? Go ahead and heal. See where it gets you."

With that, he grabbed her by the neck and stabbed her again, reopening the terrible wound that had just closed once again.

"How's that? Come on, heal it again!"

With a ferocious growl, he continued stabbing her, over and over, his hand quickly becoming painted red with blood.

"Oh, this is really fun! But a bit tiring. How about I just cut off your pretty head right now and end this?"

Nephis spat some blood and turned her head to face him.

And then she… closed her eyes.

Back when they had first arrived in the Dark City, Sunny had noticed that Cassie wasn't affected by the psychic pressure of the golden armor at all. From that, he deduced that the source of the mental assault was not the armor itself, but the golden mirror of its face — or, to be exact, seeing your reflection in it. After returning from the Castle, he had shared that insight with Nephis.

It seemed that she remembered it.

With her eyes closed, Changing Star raised her hands and grabbed the Bright Lord that was strangling her by the shoulders. Then, she used her whole body to deliver a devastating blow to his face, the gem of the Crown of Dawn hitting Gunalug right where his nose should have been.

Finally, the surface of the golden mirror cracked and shattered. Through the small breach, a blue eye full of murderous joy was revealed. Shocked by the sudden blow, Gunlaug staggered away.

"You bitch!"

The daggers were instantly absorbed into the golden armor, replaced by the heavy battle axe again.

…But he didn't get the chance to use it.

With her eyes still closed, Nephis swiftly turned to the sound of his voice. Then, she raised her hand, opened her fist… and blew on it.

In the next moment, a cloud of red sand shot from her palm and enveloped Gunlaug.

Sunny stared at it in shock, an expression of sudden recognition appearing on his face.

He knew the look of that cloud all too well. It wasn't sand.

It was the Blood Flower pollen.

Chapter-297: Red Flower

The red cloud enveloped Gunlaug, seeping through the crack in his helmet. A second too late to react, the Bright Lord reeled away… but not before inhaling the pollen of the nightmarish flower.

Sunny didn't know when and how Nephis had gotten it, but he knew that he wasn't mistaken — this was the pollen of the Blood Flower, the grisly parasitic blossom that he himself had the misfortune of inhaling once, a long time ago.

The memory of the bloodthirsty red flowers growing through his lungs sent shivers through Sunny's entire body. Back then, the only reason for why he had not become a host for the insidious Nightmare Creature was because of the Blood Weave. Without it, he would have been devoured from the inside in mere minutes.

…And now, the Bright Lord was going to fall to the same fate.

'She… she really did it…'

The rest of the Sleepers gathered in the great hall did not know that Gunlaug was already as good as dead, however. Including the tyrant himself.

Bending over in a fit of violent coughing, he growled:

"What? What have you done to me, bitch?!"

Nephis was still where he had dropped her, kneeling on the floor. Her armor was shattered and torn, with rivers of blood streaming down the cracked white metal. The brilliant radiance of her skin had been extinguished, but there were incandescent flames burning under it.

The horrible wounds on her chest were slowly closing, and the lacerations on her face were already gone, leaving it just as perfect as

it had been before. That face, however, was bloodied and pale, contorted in an expression of terrible agony.

In her eyes, however, there was dark malice.

A chorus of whispers rolled through the crowd when they witnessed the ghastly wounds healing themselves. Be it the members of the Host or the slum dwellers, all of them had two words on their lips:

"Immortal Flame!"

"Immortal Flame!"

And then someone shouted, their voice full of stunned awe:

"This… this is the blessing of the fire!"

Deaf to all of it, Changing Star moaned and slowly rose to her feet. Then, she struggled to look at the Bright Lord and said, her voice shaking from pain:

"I... I killed you."

Through the crack in the golden mask, Sunny saw Gunlaug's blue eye first narrow, and then suddenly open wide. In the next moment, the Bright Lord began coughing again.

This time, a suppressed scream escaped from his lips.

'...It's about to start.'

Sunny shifted a little, subtly positioning himself closer to Caster.

Gunlaug, meanwhile, staggered and groaned. There was blood dripping from beneath his broken mask.

Then, a shaky laugh resounded in the throne room of the ancient castle.

"Ah… did you really? What a… surprise…"

He dropped his battle axe, which then turned into a puddle of liquid gold and merged with the strange armor. He took a step toward

Nephis, but then swayed and fell to one knee.

For a few moments, the Bright Lord remained motionless. Then, his body convulsed, more blood spilling through the cracks in the visor of his golden helmet. A muffled scream could be heard once again, full of torturous pain.

Hundreds of people were watching him, stunned, their eyes full of disbelief, anger, and terror.

The Bright Lord raised his head and glanced at Nephis, then hissed:

"What a… joke! I can't… can't die like this!"

Changing Star looked down on him, her face cold and motionless. There was no triumph or gloating in her eyes.

But there was also no mercy.

Turning away, she hesitated for a moment and then said, her voice strangely gentle:

"...Rest easy now. Your nightmare is over."

Gunlaug stared at her in disbelief, and then suddenly laughed. There was a disturbing, gurgling sound coming from somewhere deep in his throat, as though he was drowning in blood.

"Good… this is too good. Yours is… only starting, though…"

With that, he slowly rose and then turned away. Swaying, the Bright Lord took one step forward, then another.

The crowd watched silently as he arduously made his way to the steps that led to the throne of white marble and climbed them, blood spilling from the cracks in his helmet, his golden armor flowing and swirling around his body in a state that resembled panic.

Finally, Gunlaug reached the dais and fell on his throne, looking down on the great hall of the ancient castle with a strange, wistful expression. Then, he strained to say something, but became twisted in a violent coughing fit instead.

In the end, he just whispered a few almost inaudible words and leaned on the back of the throne, his body relaxing. Sunny was perhaps the only one who had heard him, due to the fact that his shadow was hiding in the darkness of the alcove all along.

"I... tried. In the beginning… I really did…"

This was what Gunlaug had whispered.

And then, he grew still.

The Bright Lord of the Dark City was dead.

Sunny knew it instantly because of the fact that the terrible psychic aura pressing him to the ground suddenly disappeared, letting all the people around him move and breathe free.

Knowing what was about to come, he glanced at the far end of the great hall one last time.

A corpse in golden armor was sitting on the throne, a beautiful red blossom appearing from the crack in his polished mask.

A few moments later, the armor suddenly shined with white light and then disintegrated into countless sparks, revealing the man who had ruled this cursed place for many years with an iron fist.

Gunlaug was surprisingly handsome. Even though his face was covered in blood, it was easy to tell. He had a short beard and long blond hair. One of his eyes was gone, eaten through by the Blood Flower, and the other was quickly turning glassy.

What surprised Sunny the most, though, was how young he looked. It was hard to imagine the Bright Lord as anything but powerful and ageless, but in fact, he was no older than twenty-seven. Somehow, Sunny had forgotten that fact.

'...Kids. All of us here are just lost kids.'

He didn't waste too much time thinking about that, though.

Because in the next few moments, Tessai, who had been staring at his

dead lord with his usual morose expression, turned around and looked at the crowd of slum dwellers, then at the members of the Host.

The giant lingered for a second and then said, his deep, dark voice reverberating through the ancient hall:

"...What are you waiting for? Kill them all."

And then, everything descended into madness.

Chapter-298: Fire and Blood

The first Guard to follow Tessai's order lunged forward, summoning his weapon… and fell to the ground, a heavy kunai suddenly appearing in his eye.

Due to the everyone's attention being drawn to the bloodied figure on the throne, no one noticed as Sunny moved his hand slightly, letting the Prowling Thorn fly.

He wasn't looking at Gunlaug, though. His eyes were drawn to Nephis, while his shadow watched Caster.

When the Bright Lord died, something strange happened to Changing Star. Her eyes opened wide, losing focus, and then she swayed a little and fell to one knee.

Her body was busy rearranging itself after absorbing a huge amount of soul essence, which made Nephis vulnerable for a few moments.

That was when Tessai had given his order, and that was when Sunny threw his kunai and killed the Guard rushing to attack the slum dwellers.

Someone screamed, and in the next moment, the great hall of the Castle descended into chaos.

Unnoticed by anyone, Caster suddenly turned into a blur.

'Not so fast!'

Sunny was thrown off his feet and awkwardly fell, his wrist screaming in pain. He had achieved his goal, though: even while falling, he saw the proud Legacy rolling on the marble floor, tripped by the invisible string of the Prowling Thorn.

A second later, hundreds of Sleepers clashed against each other, their suppressed rage, bloodlust, and murderous resentment finally exploding into a storm of violence.

The white marble was instantly painted red with blood.

The Guards slaughtered indiscriminately, their powerful Memory armaments and training giving them a vast advantage over the disorganized crowd of slum dwellers. But they weren't killing just those who came from the outer settlement: in the panic and havoc that engulfed the throne room, differentiating friend from foe was not an easy task.

Sunny saw several Artisan assistants fall to their blades, as well as a few unlucky people who had paid a heavy tribute in exchange for the promise of safety.

With Gunlaug gone, that safety was now gone, too.

It almost seemed as though the Guards didn't care who they killed, or were even glad to be let off the chain. Even if there were those among them who had preserved some vestiges of conscience, now, it was utterly gone, devoured by the crowd instinct and the exhilaration of being free from all restraints.

Their faces were contorted with ferocious grimaces, and their eyes burned with rage, hatred, and tenebrous joy.

This was perhaps the most disturbing and frightening thing that Sunny had ever seen… and he had seen some of the most chilling horrors the Dream Realm had to offer.

'How can humans do this to other humans?'

But that question was moot, and also hypocritical. Humans were indeed the most adaptable of creatures. When they needed to, they were easily able to devoid their victims of the status of a human being, thus absolving themselves of any guilt or sin. Why feel guilty for slaughtering cattle?

Creatures worse than cattle, even. Hateful pests.

Sunny had practiced that simple mind trick himself in the past.

These thoughts only took him a fraction of a second. Jumping to his feet, Sunny summoned the Midnight Shard and dashed toward Nephis.

The slum dwellers, meanwhile, came to their senses and met the assault of the Host with as much fury and bloodlust. Even though they were less experienced, well-fed, and armed, their resolve and exalted fury made up for that.

"Protect Lady Nephis!"

"Kill the bastards!"

"Judgment!"

The two forces clashed, eviscerating anyone who had the misfortune of being stuck between them. Screams of terror and pain filled the great hall. The floor turned slippery with blood, and dead bodies piled on it, staring into emptiness with wide eyes.

Sunny saw the scarred hunter from before dive under the strike of a young Guard and drive the tip of his sword into the enemy's throat. He saw several Hunters of the Host lunge at Effie, who had easily tore the rope that bound her arms and met them with a ferocious grin, the beautiful bronze spear weaving itself from sparks of light in her hands.

He saw Tessai crushing a random Sleeper's skull with a heavy mace. The poor youth was only guilty of getting in his way.

He saw people screaming in fear as they tried to flee the hall. Many fell on the floor, and were then crushed under the feet of the panicking crowd…

The problem was, he didn't see Caster.

Arriving near Nephis, Sunny batted someone's sword away and then punched his opponent in the face, causing him to fly back with a pained scream. He looked around, trying to notice the proud Legacy, his mind cold and collected…

And there, he saw him. Caster may have had plans to kill Changing Star at the moment of her weakness, but thanks to Sunny's subtle intervention, he had lost that chance.

Now, the Legacy had bigger problems on his plate. With the enchanted jian in his hand, he was fighting none other than Gemma, the leader of the Hunters. No matter how strong and skilled Caster was, this was not an opponent that would go down easily, if at all. He couldn't extricate himself from that fight without risking being killed.

'...Well. That problem seems to be solved.'

But now, there was another. Much bigger one.

Back at the steps leading up to the white throne, Harus was standing with his back turned to the slaughter below, a strangely disoriented expression frozen on his face.

Sunny could see his face because the shadow never left the darkness of the alcove, watching the dreadful hunchback's every move.

Harus was staring at Gunlaug's dead body, his glassy eyes confused and empty.

But then, slowly, a hint of a dark and deadly emotion appeared in them.

Turning around, he studied the great hall, not disturbed even a little by the bloody chaos, the clangor of steel, and the scores of people dying in front of him.

And then, his gaze fell on Nephis.

'Crap.'

At that moment, both Kai and Cassie appeared by Sunny's side. Turning to them, he gestured to Changing Star and yelled:

"Protect her!"

At the dais, Harus tilted his head, piercing Changing Star with a murderous gaze. Slowly, his face contorted, turning bestial and

terrifying. Pure hatred and insanity burned in his eyes, making anyone who accidentally glanced in his direction shudder.

With a low growl, the hunchback took a step forward and outstretched his hand, ready to summon a weapon.

…But in the next second, someone crashed into him at full speed. Even though Harus had dodged the flying blade at the last moment, the force of the impact was such that both men flew back, into the darkness behind the throne.

Breaking through a wooden hatch that was hidden there, Sunny and Harus rolled down a long flight of stone stairs and left the havoc of the great hall behind.

A few moments later, they landed on the floor of a wide corridor and were thrown away from each other. Sunny twisted his body to regain his balance and used the Midnight Shard to stop himself from sliding even farther away.

Then, he rose to his feet and looked darkly at Harus, who was similarly just standing up.

A cold glint appeared in his eyes.

Just like Sunny had expected… today, one of them was going to die.

Chapter-299: Twisted Reflection

Out in the great hall of the ancient castle, the air was full of screams and clangor of steel, with rivers of blood being spilled on the white marble floor. But in the wide corridor Sunny and Harus had found themselves in, the havoc that reigned above seemed muffled and distant. It was just the two of them here.

Picking up the Midnight Shard from the cold stones, Sunny flexed his shoulders and looked at the hunchback. There was a dark, icy fire burning deep within his eyes.

"...How wonderful. We are finally alone."

The hunchback tilted his head and stared at him with his glassy eyes, not saying anything. A slight smile appeared on Sunny's lips.

"What, no reaction? Well, fair enough. Allow me to introduce myself, then. My name is Sunny… and I've been craving to kill you for a long, long time."

Harus remained motionless, looking at him with the same indifferent, bored expression. A hint of anger appeared on Sunny's face.

Taking a subtle step sideways and slightly turning his torso, he said in a casual tone:

"To tell you the truth, Harus, I have killed many monsters. Some of them were Nightmare Creatures, and some were men. I killed a person or two, as well. But I have never done it out of malice. I've never enjoyed it… too much."

He paused and then spat, his voice shaking:

"But I will enjoy killing you."

Sunny grasped the hilt of the Midnight Shard with both hands and took a step forward, piercing the hunchback with a furious gaze.

"You embody everything that I despise. The mere fact of your existence offends me. You sicken me, and for that reason alone I am going to end you. You don't deserve to live."

Harus blinked and continued staring at him, motionless. Sunny stopped a few meters away and snarled, frustrated at the lack of response.

"Do you have any idea what I had to do, what I had to sacrifice, how many things I had to let go of to save myself from becoming someone's slave? And here you are... living as one of your own free will… bastard, what gives you the right? Who gave you the idea that you can breathe the same air as I do?!"

The hunchback finally showed a sign that he had heard Sunny. With a slightly irritated expression, he shook his head and said:

"Talk, talk, talk. You talk too much, little worm."

Sunny grinned. A dangerous spark appeared in his eyes:

"Yeah? Well, what are you going to do about it?"

Harus smiled, too.

His smile was cold, unnatural, and frightening.

"Break you. Apart. You will have to die, anyway. All of you will."

Sunny raised his eyebrows.

"Oh, really? Why is that?"

The hunchback shrugged and outstretched his hand. Weaved from the sparks of light, a heavy chain appeared from the air, wrapped around his arm from wrist to elbow. Then, he grimaced and straightened his back as much as his deformity allowed him.

Before, he seemed to be of the same height as Sunny. But now, Harus

towered above him almost as much as Tessai had, his twisted figure radiating a sense of vicious, bestial power. As two menacing lights ignited in his pale eyes, he growled:

"Because this is the will of the Lord."

Sunny laughed.

"Lord? The Bright Lord? I don't want to disappoint you, fool, but your lord is dead."

Harus stared at him with sincere confusion. Then, a corner of his lips curled upward. With something that almost resembled pity, he said:

"Poor worm. You don't even understand what loyalty means, do you? Alive or dead… it doesn't matter."

Sunny snarled.

"You're right! I don't understand."

Finally, he raised his sword and prepared to attack.

"You know… I spent so much time trying to learn what your Aspect Ability and Flaw are. But now, I am glad that I don't know. I don't want to kill you using a trick. I just want to obliterate you…"

Harus listened to him. A mocking grin appeared on his lips.

…And then, Sunny suddenly became blind.

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A moment before, Sunny was looking at the hateful figure of the fearsome hunchback. Then, suddenly, his sight was gone, replaced by nothing except for boundless darkness.

'Wh…'

Almost immediately, a monstrous blow sent him flying back. Sunny hit the wall of the corridor and then fell to the floor, leaving a trail of blood on the cold stones. His bones groaned, but held together, if

barely.

Harus, who had hit him in the chest with a fist, the heavy chain wrapped around his knuckles, lunged forward with terrible speed, aiming to crush the enemy's skull under his boot. His movements were swift and utterly silent.

To his surprise, though, the little wretch somehow managed to roll away and jump back, avoiding death by a hair's breadth.

Sunny slid backward and rose to his feet, blindly swinging the Midnight Shard in a wide arc in front of him. The blade of the tachi missed the murderous hunchback entirely, but bought him a second to gather himself.

Not that it was going to help.

He was still blind.

'Of course… it all makes sense now.'

Sunny finally unraveled the mystery surrounding Harus. He understood why so many Sleepers, no matter how skilled and with no regard to the might of their Aspect Abilities, had been somehow rendered powerless and easily slaughtered by Gunalug's executioner.

He also understood why there were no witnesses to the countless murders that Harus had committed. No one had ever seen him killing his victims — their bodies were always found only after the slaughter was over.

It was not because the terrifying hunchback was able to move like a ghost or possessed such great power that no one could even try to resist it.

…It was because his Aspect Ability could literally make people not see him.

Or anything, for that matter.

It didn't matter how skilled or mighty his opponents were. Once they were blind, all their technique and Abilities were made useless.

Killing a blind person was an easy task.

It also did not matter if someone was there to see Harus kill — as long as he wanted, he would remain unseen.

That's how the legend of the horrifying butcher was born. People were always more afraid of things that they couldn't see, after all.

Sunny spat a mouthful of blood and grimaced.

It was nice to reveal another secret.

The question was… would he be able to survive knowing the truth?

Chapter-300: Bright Lord's Slave

By a twist of fate, today, Harus was facing possibly the worst opponent he could have faced on the Forgotten Shore… among the Sleepers, at least.

However, Sunny wasn't surprised.

He had always felt that he and the murderous hunchback were destined to end up fighting each other to the bitter end. Before, he had thought that this was just intuition, but now he knew that his occasional and subtle premonitions were anything but random.

All that time ago, he had already sensed that the two of them were connected by a string of fate.

Was it such a surprise, then, that his Aspect happened to counter that of Harus to a large extent?

And it did counter it, although not completely.

If anyone else was in Sunny's place, they would have been already dead. Robbed of their sight, very few people — if anyone at all — could have resisted the furious assault of the terrifyingly strong hunchback. But Sunny wasn't just anyone.

Even while blind, he had Shadow Sense on his side. While it wasn't the same as being able to see Harus, by sensing the movements of his shadow, Sunny was able to predict his attacks with at least some level of precision.

It wasn't perfect, though. At least he had not reached the level where this form of perception could fully replace vision.

So, now, Sunny had a choice to make.

While his shadow was wrapped around his body, it gave him an incredible boost in strength, speed, and endurance. It wasn't able to provide him with a second pair of eyes, however.

So he could either continue to rely solely on Shadow Sense and keep this boost, or let the shadow go and fight Harus with just his own strength while being able to see.

'Decisions, decisions…'

Sensing the hunched shadow of the murderous butcher lunge forward, Sunny dodged left and heard something whistle past his temple with terrible speed. A fraction of a second later, and his skull would have been crushed by the links of the iron chain wrapped around his enemy's fist.

He missed the hunchback's other hand, though.

His wrist was suddenly caught in an iron grip and twisted, forcing Sunny to yelp and let go of the Midnight Shard. Another second, and his bones were going to shatter…

Following the direction of the twist, Sunny performed an aerial cartwheel to save his arm and reluctantly ordered the shadow to slip off his body.

As he landed on the stones, Sunny was finally able to see again.

Harus was holding him by the wrist with one hand, his other raising to deliver a crushing blow. Sunny doubted that there would be anything left of his face if he were to allow that blow to land.

…He still held the Midnight Shard in his free hand.

Turning the tachi upward, Sunny thrust it in the direction of the hunchbacks' throat. As a hint of surprise appeared in his enemy's eyes, Harus changed the direction of his strike, turning it into a block instead.

The razor-sharp blade bit into the links of the heavy chain wrapped tightly around his forearm and bounced off.

However, that gave Sunny the opportunity to wrestle his wrist free and jump back. Despite the fact that his bruised hand was shaking, he put it back on the hilt of the Midnight Shard and faced Harus once again.

The hunchback titled his head and stared at Sunny with an amused expression.

"Slippery worm... how are you doing that?"

Sunny grinned.

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

Then, he grimaced and added after a few moments of pained silence.

"...I can still see you thanks to my Aspect."

Harus grinned.

"Oh? Good… it is nice of you to tell me…"

With that, he suddenly threw his hand forward.

'What is he doing?'

The distance between them was too large to land a punch…

But in the next moment, Sunny realized his mistake. It was too late, however.

The chain suddenly flew off the hunchback arm and instantly covered the distance between them. Before Sunny could react, it was tightly wrapped around the blade of the Midnight Shard.

Then, Harus pulled it back with tremendous force.

Sunny could either allow himself to be thrown to the floor right in front of the cruel executioner or let go of his sword. He chose the second option.

The Midnight Shard flew far away and fell on the marble floor with a melodious ringing. There was little hope of retrieving it… and Sunny

doubted that Harus was going to give him enough time to dismiss and summon the tachi again.

Indeed, almost instantly, the fearsome hunchback was already lunging at him, the iron hammers of his fists ready to break every bone in Sunny's body.

'Go die, bastard!'

Sunny growled and dashed forward. Dodging a deadly, strike, he twisted his body and delivered a ferocious blow of his own. His fist connected to the hunchback's chin, making Harus reel back.

Sunny might have been lean and not as tall as most men, but he wasn't a weak outskirt kid anymore.

The power of nine hundred shadow fragments, each earned in a deadly fight against unimaginable horrors, coursed through his veins. He was much stronger than he looked.

Strong enough to shatter stones with his bare hands.

…And yet, he wasn't nearly as strong as Harus. While shaken by the blow to the face, the hunchback didn't look seriously hurt. But his next strike almost made Sunny buckle.

For a few short moments, the two of them became entwined in violent, barbarous combat. Using their fists, legs, and even teeth, they did anything in their power to destroy the enemy. Harus fought with the measured skill of an experienced killer, while Sunny fought with the desperate, feral cunning that his cruel upbringing had taught him.

The hunchback was at a dire advantage in that fight. With his tremendous might and much larger weight and reach, all he had to do to win it was to wrestle Sunny to the ground. Knowing that, Sunny had done everything in his power to avoid being grappled. He twisted and moved, dodging the hunchback's large hands and delivering strike after strike.

Soon, Harus was bleeding from a half-dozen cuts on his angular face. Sunny, however, was in much worse shape. The hunchback's fists, and especially that damned chain of his, had left terrible marks on

his body. The skin on his forehead was split open, and a stream of blood was flowing down his face.

Usually, that would have blinded a person. But both of his eyes were already blind; he was using his shadow to see.

'...How ironic.'

Still, it was just a matter of time before Sunny made a mistake. And very soon, he did.

Sunny was only a fraction of a second late, but it was all Harus needed to land one of his wide palms on his shoulder. Then, he gripped it with enough strength to make Sunny's bones groan, thus robbing the enemy of his only advantage — mobility.

As Sunny's eyes opened wide, the hunchback grinned.

"...Time to die, little worm."

With that, he threw him against the wall, making a net of cracks streak through its stone surface. Hurt and disoriented, Sunny felt something cold and inevitable grip his neck.

Looking his victim right in the eyes, Harus squeezed Sunny's neck and smiled.

"Good. It's good that you can see. Usually, they don't. Such a pity…"

Sunny raised his fist and hit the hunchback in the face, but to no result. He couldn't find the proper purchase or move his torso to deliver a proper blow.

Regardless, he tried again, then again, then again.

The skin on the face of his strangler split, letting more blood flow, but Harus just continued smiling, looking at him with fascination.

"Good. Good. This is so good… so, so good..."

Sunny weakly raised his hand again, but lingered, hesitating before trying to hit the hunchback again.

With what little air remained in his lungs, he wheezed:

"Hey, bastard… do you remember… how I told you… that I didn't want to use a trick… to kill you?"

Harus simply grinned.

"...well… that… that was a trick…"

At the same time, he struck the hunchback in the face again. Knowing that these punches were not strong enough to change anything, Harus didn't react.

But this time, a ghostly blade suddenly appeared in Sunny's hand at the last moment. Unlike normal Memories, this one weaved itself from nothing and almost instantaneously.

Then, it pierced Harus's temple and sunk deep into his brain, killing him on the spot.

The grin froze on the hunchback's lips. His eyes widened, then slowly turned glassy. His terrible grip on Sunny's throat weakened.

Then, he crumpled to the ground like a broken mannequin, his empty eyes still open and staring into nothingness.

Sunny fell to his knees and drew a hoarse breath.

"Die... you bastard. Die, die, die…"

A wicked, furious grin appeared on his face.

"Die and go keep your lord company in hell!"

Shaking, he used the wall to stand up and looked at the dead butcher with a strange mix of hatred, triumph, and contempt.

After a while, he said:

"Don't want to doesn't mean I won't, you fool."

Chapter-301: Heirs to the Throne

As Sunny sat on the cold stones, wiping blood off his face and wincing from pain, the whole castle shook slightly, and dust fell from the ceiling of the wide corridor. Looking up, he frowned slightly, then turned to Harus and indifferently cut a strip of cloth from the hunchback's garments.

The corpse didn't mind.

Tying the cloth around his head to stop the blood from streaming into his eyes, Sunny sighed and summoned the runes.

Shadow Fragments: [956/1000].

"Such an injustice…"

His battle with Harus was one of the toughest he had experienced on the Forgotten Shore, but all he got from it was one measly shadow fragment. This was one of the lamentable quirks of the Shadow Slave Aspect — it didn't differentiate between humans and Nightmare Creatures at all. From its point of view, Harus was nothing but a dormant beast.

…Or maybe it was a blessing in disguise.

"Killing humans is a really unlucrative business," Sunny said with regret and glanced in the direction of the throne room, where the terrible battle still raged on.

Several hundred humans driven insane by fury and bloodlust could create a lot of destruction in a very short amount of time. Several hundred powerful Sleepers, each in possession of an Aspect Ability, were so much worse. Add the Echoes in the mix, and Sunny

shuddered to imagine what was going on back in the great hall right now.

The number of lives being extinguished every second up there must have been immense. The members of the Host, the followers of Changing Star, and everyone unlucky enough to exist on the Forgotten Shore today were dying by the score. Blood was flowing like a river in the halls of the Bright Castle… just like Cassie had predicted all those months ago.

Just like Sunny had feared it would.

What was Nephis thinking?

Her ambition had never been to become the ruler of the Dark City. Wrestling the control over the ancient castle from Gunlaug had always been just a means to an end. Her true goal had always been in the Crimson Spire.

…Where the Terror of the Forgotten Shore dwelt.

From that point of view, this massacre was such a waste. Of potential soldiers, of countless Memories, of every other potential resource she was going to need to reach the Gateway.

But then, was it really?

After all, the rest of humanity was not bound by the strangeness of the divine Aspect Sunny possessed. When one Awakened killed another, they received a vast portion of the soul essence their enemy had accumulated. A lot of it simply disappeared, but what remained was more than enough.

The Crimson Spire was not a place one could conquer with cannon fodder. So really, Nephis did not need a thousand weak humans. What she really needed was a few hundred powerful, battle-tested fighters.

What was happening in the Bright Castle right now was not a waste.

It was consolidation.

Sunny sighed and rose to his feet, summoning the Midnight Shard from the darkness of his soul.

It was time to rejoin the battle.

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In the end, almost two hundred people perished on that day. Despite all that death, the battle ended in a bitter draw.

And the main reason for this was only three people: Nephis, Tessai, and Gemma.

No matter how powerful and skilled the rest of the Sleepers participating in the battle were, no one stood a chance in a fight against any one of these three. Not even Caster, who by then many had believed to be one of the strongest fighters in all of Dark City due to his incredible skill, powerful Aspect, and noble background.

When the proud Legacy clashed against the leader of the Hunters, his enchanted jian quickly found its way into Gemma's heart. However, to everyone's horror, the tall man did not even blink after receiving the mortal wound. And just a few short moments later, it magically closed, not leaving even a scar behind.

No matter how many times Caster had cut or pierced the body of the fearsome Hunter, Gemma's flesh simply restored itself. It was as though the proud Legacy was cutting water.

Gemma's Aspect Ability made him nearly immortal, while his incredible skill, cunning, and might made him a herald of death.

Tessai was equally as formidable. His powerful Aspect Ability was tied to cold and ice. It allowed him to both make his skin hard as stone and debilitate his enemies, turning their movements slow and stiff. What was worse, it countered Neph's flames to a large degree.

Eventually, when the death toll became too large, all three gave their followers a command to retreat.

By the end of the day, the new Lord of the Bright Castle was still not decided. The castle itself became divided between three warring

factions, led by the three contenders to the throne.

The largest and strongest faction, one with the most fighters and most Memories to arm them, was formed by the alliance between Tessai and the leader of Handmaidens, Seishan. Together, the Guards and the Handmaidens became a force that the other two factions could not challenge openly.

They held the northern and western parts of the Castle, where most of the strategic and easily defendable areas of it were situated.

The second faction was led by Gemma and Kido, the chief Artisan. While the two of them had fewer fighters than both other factions, each of these fighters was worth a dozen. They were the Hunters, the most experienced and formidable Sleepers in all of the Dark City.

Although the territory this faction held was not large, it was of utmost importance, since they controlled the only reliable source of food and water in the Bright Castle.

The last faction belonged to Nephis alone. She controlled the southern part of the Castle, where its main gate was situated, as well as the outer settlement, to where many of the previous inhabitants of the ancient citadel had fled in hope of finding shelter.

However, they quickly realized that there was no more safety anywhere in the Dark City.

With Gunlaug gone, all order disappeared. No one went on hunts to bring back food, no one manned the walls to drive the Nightmare Creatures away, no one was there to stop the crime and violence that blossomed in darkness off anarchy.

And things weren't going to change until a new Lord usurped the white throne.

The bloody struggle for the crown had begun.

Chapter-302: Status Quo

In the next couple of weeks, the Bright Castle had become a strange place.

Inside its magnificent halls, barricades were built and three makeshift fortresses appeared, each faction holding a specific territory. Beyond these protected areas, there was no man's land. Going outside of a faction's stronghold was often tantamount to death.

No one knew what they would encounter there. Corpses littered the floor, with an occasional marauder hiding in the darkness. With no more law, tyrannical as it had been, many people gave in to their darkest impulses. But these wretches were the least of the dangers that now populated the Castle.

A much worse fate was to stumble onto a patrol or a war party of another faction. The Guards especially were quick to slaughter anyone they met, sometimes in gruesome and inventive ways. The Hunters and the followers of Changing Star were equally as ruthless, but at least not without reason or provocation.

But the most terrifying change was that now, humans weren't the only ones populating the ancient citadel anymore.

After Gunlaug's death, too many people were killed, and the rest were too busy with their little war to keep defending the Castle. And just like that, after so many years, the Nightmare Creatures had returned under its roof.

Some were killed by the representatives of the factions, but some managed to hide themselves and create nests somewhere in the depths of the stronghold. No one knew how many there were, but the terror kept people awake at night.

There were also a lot of rumors going around, one more frightening

than the other. The most persistent of them told of a horrible creature called Blood Lord, which apparently stalked the corridors of the Bright Castle and killed humans, tearing their throats open with sharp fangs and consuming all of their blood.

Some even thought that it was Gunlaug himself, who returned from the grave to bring vengeance to his killers.

Sunny was doubtful of these rumors up until the moment when he had found a bloodless corpse of a young Guard on one of his patrols. For a moment, he felt fear creep into his heart. He knew what the Blood Flowers were, after all. But then he calmed himself down, remembering that the Bright Lord's body had been destroyed during the massacre that followed his death.

If the corpse of Gunlaug wasn't walking around drinking people's blood, though… then what was?

There were a lot of disturbing things happening in the Castle these days.

Apart from the frequent but minor skirmishes between the factions, people kept dying in all manner of morbid ways. He didn't even want to think about it. There was no safe place anywhere now, except for maybe the three strongholds.

The outer settlement had been completely abandoned. At first, Nephis had tried to create a safe haven there for those who did not wish to participate in the war, but she was quickly taught a bloody lesson by her enemies — spreading her forces too thin was simply an invitation for an attack.

After that, all of her followers, willing or unwilling, had relocated to the southern part of the Castle and joined the ranks of her fighting force.

And yet, even two weeks later, nothing had changed. The three factions continued their bloody struggle, unable to break the status quo.

Soon, something had to change.

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One evening, Sunny was sitting on a crate in one of the halls of Changing Star's stronghold. In his hand was a bowl with a measly ration, which he nevertheless was eating with a lot of enthusiasm.

A few meters away from him, a couple of Neph's followers were doing the same while having a conversation. Out of boredom, he listened to their voices as he ate.

"Have you heard? They found another dead Guard near the throne room. The Blood Lord got him."

"Good riddance. That thing really creeps me out, though."

"Yeah. Scary. But… do you know what I'm really afraid of?"

The slum dweller looked at his partner, who had been paying a tribute to live in the castle just a few weeks ago, and raised an eyebrow.

"What?"

"Harus. That creepy bastard. Where is he now? Damn, if I were able to dream, I am sure I would be having nightmares about that butcher every night."

"...Wait. You didn't hear?"

"What?"

"He's dead."

The tributary opened his eyes wide, while Sunny turned away and tried to suppress a smile.

"No way!"

"Yeah. They found his body after the big battle in a hidden passage behind the throne. Someone had… had beaten him to death. With bare fists. That's what I heard."

For a few seconds, there was silence. Then, one of them said:

"What kind of human could kill that monster? With bare hands?"

The slum dweller shivered.

"That's the thing. No one knows. All of the powerhouses were accounted for. You saw it yourself, they were all fighting in the throne room."

"...Crap. Now I am even more scared. Harus was dreadful enough, but to think that there's a person in this Castle who is powerful enough to kill him so easily… while remaining completely unnoticed and unknown, for all this time… damn, that's terrifying."

The slum dweller gave him a nod and turned to Sunny:

"Hey… Sunny, right? You're Lady Nephis's scout? Who do you think could kill Harus?"

Sunny thought for a moment and then said honestly:

"Well… apart from yours truly, who is a true terror on the battlefield and possibly one of the deadliest Sleepers to ever exist in the world… uh… I think Cassie could."

The young man stared at him with disapproval and then shook his head.

"Not cool, man. Boasting is fine, I guess, but mocking Lady Cassia was really low of you."

Sunny blinked. When did he mock Cassie? Considering the Aspect Ability that Harus had possessed, she was really the next best person to fight the hunchback after Sunny himself. She was already blind and adapted to fighting in that state as best as she could. With the help of her Echoes, Cassie stood a good chance of surviving that battle.

With an apologetic smile, he shrugged and said:

"Sorry, I just chose my words badly. In any case, I'm off."

With that, he jumped off the crate and headed toward the barricade that served as the border of the faction's stronghold.

The slum dweller raised his eyebrows.

"Where are you going? The night is approaching!"

Sunny grinned.

"Hunting for a big one. Ah, don't worry. I lived in the Dark City for three months, remember? Nothing is going to happen to me today…"

Chapter-303: Helpful Shadow

The slum dweller pressed his finger against his lips and hissed in exasperation:

"Take that back! Are you crazy?"

Sunny blinked.

"What? No. Well, I was crazy for a while. But now I am not."

The young man looked at him with doubt and shook his head:

"Still, don't jinx yourself. Do you at least have a Memory to keep you safe?"

The question of arming themselves was a big problem for Neph's followers. More than half of them didn't have a Memory armor or a weapon, having to make do with mundane armaments fashioned out of anything that was at hand. It was one of the reasons why fighting against the Guards and the Hunters was so hard for them.

The other guy, the one who used to pay tribute, sighed and call out to his friend:

"Have you lost your mind? You are talking to a member of Lady Nephis's personal cohort. Of course he has Memories."

With that, both of them looked down on their own makeshift swords.

These two were among those who wielded Black Claws, blades made out of the talons of the Spire Messenger Sunny and the rest had killed. Their bases were wrapped with leather, allowing a person to use the long curved talon as a weapon.

Considering that these talons came from a Fallen Monster, as far as weapons went, they were some of the best. Wielding them efficiently

was not an easy task, though.

The slum dweller grimaced.

"Right. Damn! I am proud to wield one of the Black Claws, don't get me wrong. But if each of us had a proper set of Memories… those bastards wouldn't be picking us off one by one anymore, that's for sure."

Sunny looked at him with a complicated expression. Then, he smiled.

"A good Memory can change a lot, that's true."

As soon as he turned around, the smile disappeared from his face.

'...It's not going to save your lives, though. All of you are just walking corpses.'

With that, he left the two Sleepers behind, climbed over the barricade, and left.

Nevertheless, they were right. The lack of Memories was a big problem.

…Sunny walked through the shadows, moving deeper and deeper into the belly of the ancient citadel. The Bright Castle was enormous in size and had countless twisting corridors. Some were comparatively easy to navigate, while some followed no apparent logic. There were tall towers connected by aerial bridges and deep dungeons full of darkness and danger.

There were humans with murder in their hearts prowling these corridors, as well as much more terrifying things. Disturbing sounds sometimes echoed through the stone halls, making Sunny stop and frown.

A couple of times, he decided to hide to avoid being noticed by the patrols of the Guards or the Hunters. Following in their wake, he stumbled on a few fresh bodies and regretted not killing those bastards when he had the chance.

Half an hour later, Sunny was somewhere under the main keep of the

Castle, moving through a dark corridor with careful steps. It was then then that he heard the sounds of a struggle coming from beyond the next turn.

'...Ugh, what a bother.'

Hesitating for a bit, he made the turn and witnessed a scene that was typical in the ancient citadel these days.

One human was trying to kill another.

In this case, it was a burly Guard that seemed vaguely familiar. The large man was pressing someone small and skinny to the wall, strangling them with gauntleted hands. A broken oil lantern was burning on the floor, making the shadows of the two struggling people seem large and menacing.

The Guard's face had four deep scratches on it, which were oozing blood. It was contorted in an expression of rage and dark delight. The face of his victim, meanwhile, was slowly turning blue.

It was a petite young woman with dark hair and brown eyes, which were currently full of pain and despair.

Just a few moments before she lost consciousness, though, a hand appeared from the darkness and slid a strange transparent dagger across the Guard's throat. Hot blood shot into the air, and he fell to the ground with a horrified, gurgling sound.

The young woman staggered and drew in a hoarse breath, rubbing her bruised neck. A few moments later, she looked up and cautiously studied her savior.

It was a very pale, slender young man with a youthful face and dark, strangely magnetic eyes. Currently, he was wiping his dagger on the sleeve of his armor and staring at the dying Guard with an indifferent expression.

In fact, he was disturbingly nonchalant, not at all like someone who had just killed another human being. There was neither disgust and fear nor delight and triumph on his face, just… nothing at all.

It was the face of a cold-blooded killer.

Turning to her, the young man smiled:

"Uh… you're Aiko, right?"

Sunny looked the young woman over, making sure that she wasn't seriously wounded. He knew her a bit from his days in the Castle. Back then, she had been one of the few people who were able to pay tribute without worrying about making enough shards to do so the next week.

She owned the only gambling den in the Dark City, which automatically made her establishment popular among the members of the Host. But it was also the reason why many of them harbored resentment toward the tiny girl.

Aiko cautiously nodded. Usually, there were mischievous sparks in her eyes, but right now, there was nothing but subdued fear. Sunny dismissed the Moonlight Shard and said in a friendly tone:

"Nice to meet you. I'm Sunny."

The young woman stared at him for a bit, and then said:

"You're one of Changing Star's men, right?"

He grimaced.

"I'm no one's man. I'm completely my own. But yes, currently, Nephis is my… employer, I guess."

Aiko hesitated and said in a polite and pleasant voice:

"I see… well, Sunny. Thank you for saving my skin. I'll be going then."

Sunny grinned.

"Oh, I'm sorry… did I say that you can go? I think not. In fact, I must insist that you stay."

Aiko glanced at the corpse of the Guard, then back at the pale young man. Did she imagine it or were there slight hints of madness in his eyes now?

"Ah, why didn't you say so! If you want me to stay, then I will definitely stay. It will be my pleasure, really. But, uh, Sunny… why exactly did you want me to stay?"

He scratched the back of his head and answered after a bit of a pause:

"Oh, I'm glad that you asked. You see, I am trying to hunt down a big one. And I thought that you would be able to help…"

Chapter-304: Hunting for a Big One

Sunny stared at Aiko, secretly delighted that he didn't have to look up for a change. The young woman's eyes darted into the depths of the corridor, clearly evaluating how good her chances of running away were.

...They weren't.

In the end, she sighed and turned to Sunny with a deep frown. For some reason, such a serious expression looked a bit comical on her petite face.

"Sunny, was it? Listen, buddy… uh… boss. I am really thankful to you for helping me out, but honestly, do I look like a hunter? How am I supposed to help you hunt? Maybe go ask one of your strong manly friends…"

Then, her eyes widened.

"You're not planning on using me as bait, are you?"

Sunny chuckled.

"No, no. Nothing like that. It's just that for this particular hunt, you are the only one who can help. By the way, I didn't just stumble on you by chance. I was watching you for a long time, actually."

She paled a little.

"Ah, I see. Well… to each their own, I guess. But still, I am no warrior. I really think that I won't be able to help you out this time, sadly…"

Sunny shook his head.

"Relax, Aiko. You see, the big one I'm hunting… is a friend of yours. Big, fat bastard named Stev. He's the one I'm after. And I know for a fact that you know where he is hiding. Because you're the one hiding him.

So…"

An expression of utter surprise appeared on Aiko's face. With sincere confusion, she asked:

"Wait, what? Stev? The Memory Market guy? Why the Spell would I know where he is?!"

She blinked a couple of times, then said in a hesitant tone:

"Are you sure you're not confusing me with someone, Sunny?"

He sighed and lingered for a few moments, then rolled his eyes.

"Alright. I don't really want to waste time here, so we'll do it the quick way. Look there."

He pointed to his shadow. Aiko lowered her eyes, which then widened when the shadow suddenly turned its head and waved to her.

"What the…"

Sunny crossed his arms and said:

"This here is my shadow. It's an invaluable helper. Among other things, it can walk around on its own and report back to me the things it saw. Guess what it saw yesterday?"

Aiko paled, staring at the shadow with wide eyes.

The shadow stared back at her, full of disdain.

"So… let's not pretend that you don't know where Stev is. Just take me to him."

The young woman glanced at him and gritted her teeth. Then, she asked with dark resolve in her eyes:

"What do you want from him?"

Sunny raised his eyebrows.

"What do I want? That guy is walking around with a hundred Memories in his soul core. Guess."

Aiko clenched her tiny fists.

"He's my friend. I'm not going to…"

Sunny waved his hand and interrupted her.

"Oh, don't be so dramatic. I'm not going to do anything bad to him. If I wanted to, I would have killed you already. My shadow saw where you were going already, remember?"

In fact, Sunny was bluffing. While he was almost sure that Aiko was hiding Stev because of how much food she was stealing every couple of days — too much for such a tiny girl to eat on her own — he had no idea where her hideout was.

That was because it was situated somewhere past the Guard's territory, and Sunny had avoided sending his shadow anywhere near where Seishan was.

A stunned expression appeared on her face. After a while, Aiko asked:

"You really are not going to hurt us?"

Sunny offered her his most friendly, honest smile.

For some reason, the petite girl shuddered.

"I am not, you can trust me. I am the most honest man in the world, after all. Two worlds, even…"

***

A few hours later, three figures were sneaking through the corridors

of the Bright Castle. One was a pale young man in dark leather armor, the second was a petite girl with mischievous eyes, and the third was a giant of a man with a vast round belly.

Because of him, all their attempts of being stealthy were rendered practically useless.

Nearing another corner, Sunny sighed and gave the other two a signal to stop.

"The Guards are patrolling ahead. We'll have to wait for a bit."

Stev and Aiko glanced at each other and shrugged. Because of their difference in size, the two looked nothing short of comical together. Shaking his head, Sunny summoned the Endless Spring and took a few sips of water, then offered the beautiful glass bottle to them.

"Why were you hiding from everyone anyway, Stev?"

The ample giant looked at him with a sullen expression, then said in a depressed tone:

"Why else? As soon as this mess started, I knew that people would be coming for me to get the Memories."

Sunny frowned.

"The Memory Market belonged to the Host, so why didn't you just go to either Tessai or Gemma?"

Stev grimaced.

"I know Tessai too well to go anywhere near him with Lord Gunlaug gone. As for Gemma — we're on friendly terms, actually. But that girl, Kido… uh, let's just say that I called her a few names in the past. Over a, uh… business dispute, one might say. Who knew she'll go and become one of the lieutenants? Anyway, I was afraid for my safety because she and Gemma are, you know…"

Sunny raised an eyebrow, then asked in an curious tone:

"Then what about Nephis?"

Aiko gave him a complicated look.

"We heard that her people don't treat us Castle folk well. And Stev was even officially under the Host, so… we sort of had nowhere to go."

Sunny frowned. There was indeed a measure of internal strife in Neph's faction, with some outer settlement people being against anyone from the Castle joining them. Changing Star and the members of her cohort tried to prevent anything too nasty from happening, but they couldn't be everywhere at once.

"There are a few troublemakers, true. But you'll be fine. Just say that you're with me."

He thought for a couple of moments, and then corrected himself:

"Actually, don't say that. Most of them barely know who I am. Say that you're with Night. And if Night asks why are you going around telling people that you're with him, then tell him that you're with me."

The two of them suddenly looked at him.

"My buddy Kai is alive? That's wonderful news!" Stev said with a wide smile.

On Aiko's face, a dreamy expression appeared.

"Why haven't you told me that you knew Night from the start? That would have made things so much easier!"

Sunny stared at them and shook his head.

"Pick up your drool, will you?"

Why had he even spent a whole hour trying to convince Stev to return with him? He could have just taken Kai with him, and the damn bastard would just say yes after one smile from the beautiful archer.

'So unfair...'

Then, he suddenly turned his head and froze.

Something was wrong. Very, very wrong. The Guards that were supposed to walk past his shadow a whole minute ago… never appeared.

Chapter-305: Trail of Blood

Raising his hand, Sunny gave Aiko and Stev a signal to remain quiet. Then, with a frown, he commanded the shadow to abandon its hiding spot and find the Guards.

'They can't be near us… I would have heard them.'

Then where did the bastards go?

Soon, he had his answer.

The three Guards were in the corridor a hundred or so steps from Sunny's current position, just behind a corner. In a place where they shouldn't have been, since it was way off their previous route.

They were also dead.

Two had their skulls smashed in. Sunny did not know what weapon, tool, or limb was used to kill them, because their Memory armors had already disappeared. It had to have been something capable of piercing through steel, though, because the Guards had been wearing helmets the last time he saw them.

The third was even worse. His throat was torn, seemingly with terribly sharp fangs… to such degree that the young man's head was almost separated from his body. One would expect a sea of blood to come out of such a terrible wound, but in fact, there was surprisingly little of it on the floor.

However, the corpse of the Guard was unnaturally pale, as if devoid of blood completely.

'Curses…'

Sunny felt a cold shiver run through his body.

The shadow cautiously looked around, but didn't notice anyone else present on the scene of the gruesome slaughter.

Aiko and Stev were staring at Sunny with alarmed expressions. After waiting for several minutes, he finally relaxed a little and motioned for them to follow.

"What happened?"

He hesitated for a few seconds, then said in an even tone:

"The Blood Lord has just been here."

Their eyes widened.

"That fiend?! Then why aren't we running?!"

Sunny glanced at them with a calm expression.

"Don't worry, it's already gone."

Inside, however, he was anything but calm.

A creature capable of killing three Guards was not necesarrily something he would be scared of. One that managed to get past his shadow and slaughter them just a hundred steps away without making enough noise to attract his attention… that, on the other hand, was a reason for concern.

'Just what kind of an abomination is it?'

Sadly, the three of them had to pass the place where the Guards had been killed to reach their destionation. Soon, the smell of blood hit their nostrils, making Aiko and Stev turn pale.

The bodies of the Guards looked even more gruesome in person. Sunny frowned slightly, while Aiko and Stev had to struggle to keep the contents of their stomachs inside.

"Gods… poor bastards…"

Sunny did not say anything, looking around with a dark expression.

He was hoping to notice something that his shadow had missed to give him a clue of what type of Nightmare Creature the Blood Lord was, exactly.

But there were no signs that anyone except for the three Guards had been in this corridor in a long time.

"Hey, Sunny? Can we please leave? This crap doesn't seem to bother you, but I… I mean, Stev seems to be really scared. Just imagine what is going to happen if he faints and falls. The whole Castle will hear, probably…"

Sunny hesitated for a little, then nodded.

Just before they left, however, he suddenly noticed something glint in the pool of blood. The shadow had not noticed it earlier because there was nothing to shine on the small object and make it reflect the light back.

Crouching, he reached out with his hand and picked up the bloodied piece of metal, then brought it close to his eyes to take a closer look.

Pressed between his fingers was an intricate silver earring in the shape of a flower blossom. It wasn't a charm Memory, though… just a simple piece of jewelry.

'What is that thing doing here?'

With a confused scowl, he lingered for a few moments and then stood up, turning away from the mangled corpses.

"Let's get out of here…"

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Soon, they returned to the barricades creating the border of Changing Star's territory. The Sleepers standing watch were surprised to see Sunny come back with two strangers, but let them in without asking any questions.

Aiko raised an eyebrow.

"Aren't you guys going to inspect us? What if we're spies?"

The watchmen glanced at each other, and then one of them said:

"Usually, we would. But it's Sunny."

The petite young woman smiled.

"Oh! Is he in very high regard around here?"

The watchman gave a strange look, then coughed with a bit of embarrassment.

"Uh… it's not that. It's just that starting a conversation with him is, uh… well, you know. A headache."

Sunny stared at him with an offended expression.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

The watchman hurriedly shook his head.

"No, no. Nothing. Uh, I need to inspect the barricade. If you'll excuse me…"

With that, he made a hasty retreat.

'Did I scam him out of his boots or something?'

Shaking his head in bewilderment, Sunny turned away and led the two newcomers deeper into the stronghold, searching for Nephis.

She was alone in a spacious room. Changing Star sat on the floor, wrapping herself in her white cloak, and stared at the wall with a distant expression.

These days, Neph was a bit strange. She had always been aloof and hard to read, but now, her usually indifferent face had become completely motionless. Her grey eyes had always been calm, but now, they seemed to be especially cold. Almost… empty.

Sunny had no idea what was going on with her.

'Maybe she hasn't recovered from using her Aspect Ability to its full extent, still…'

Clearing his throat to attract her attention, Sunny gestured to the giant man and the tiny girl he brought.

"Hey, Neph. I've recruited these guys."

She tilted her head a little and didn't say anything.

Sunny smiled.

"You must remember Aiko. She was the one on whose behalf you had challenged that Pathfinder, Andel. And cut his head off."

Then, he glanced at Aiko and narrowed his eyes.

The petite girl hurriedly said:

"Oh, yes! Thank you, Lady Changing Star. That guy was… uh... a real menace."

Nephis slowly nodded and said evenly:

"...You're welcome."

Then, she looked at Stev.

"...And you are?"

A wide grin appeared on Sunny's face.

"Oh. This is Stev. Stev is a very special guy. You see… he has a hundred battle-ready Memories stored in his soul core."

With that, Sunny patted Stev on the shoulder and said:

"...Basically, he's going to solve our weapons problem."

Chapter-306: Final Confrontation

With the whole of Memory Market suddenly falling into the hands of Changing Star's faction, the skirmishes happening in the halls of the Bright Castle became even more frequent and brutal. People kept killing each other, slowly painting the whole citadel red.

And yet, it was still not enough for a winner to emerge.

Nephis was always on the frontlines, leading her people and slaying countless enemies with her silver blade, as if alien to the very concept of mercy. Wherever she appeared, blood flowed like a river. She had even clashed against Tessai personally, but their fearsome battle ended in a draw.

Now that more than two weeks had passed after Gunlaug's death and the decimation of the previous order, humans were starting to suffer from the lack of food. There were more and more Nightmare Creatures finding their way into the Castle, too. The situation was slowly turning into an irreversible crisis.

In fact, it already had.

The civil war raged on, reaping human lives one after another. But it was also forging those who remained alive into much more fearsome, powerful, and hardened fighters.

And then, suddenly, the status quo was finally decimated, announcing to everyone left alive in the Bright Castle that the end was drawing close.

The new Lord was about to take his crown. And it was not going to be the most noble or formidable of the candidates.

It was going to be the most vicious.

The news arrived in the stronghold of the Changing Star's faction at the darkest hour of the night. The scouts sent into the depths of the Castle returned one after another, bringing with them shocking news.

The Castle Guard had secretly launched an all-out assault on the stronghold held jointly by Gemma and Kido. The Hunters were defeated, losing many of their numbers in the battle. Left without their protection, almost every Artisan had been captured by the Guards, while Kido herself had been killed by Tessai with his own two hands. After her death, Gemma and his surviving warriors had to flee.

After the scouts made their report, a heavy silence settled over the stronghold. Everyone understood what was going to happen next.

The faction formed by the alliance of the Guards and the Handmaidens had already been the most powerful of the three. Now that all the Artisans were in their hands and most of the Castle was under their control…

They would be coming for Changing Star and her people next.

In that silence, Nephis looked around, at the pale faces of her followers, and said after a long and poignant pause:

"...Stay strong. We will prevail."

However, for the first time, her words did not seem to convince them.

After a long and sleepless night, an unexpected visitor arrived in the stronghold.

It was Gemma, the mighty leader of the Hunters.

The tall man looked very different from how he had before. His laidback attitude was gone, replaced with dark exhaustion. His face was grim and ashen, and his light armor was torn and covered with blood.

He wished to speak with Changing Star.

After she arrived in front of him, Gemma offered her the services of his remaining men in the struggle against Tessai.

She tilted her head and asked, her voice emotionless:

"What about your ambitions? Didn't you want to become the next Lord?"

Gemma was silent for a long time, the fire extinguished in his eyes. Finally, he said:

"I never wanted to be a Lord. It was Kido's wish. Now that that damn butcher… now that she's dead, I don't care about the throne anymore."

He paused, a mournful shadow veiling his eyes. But then, embers of scathing hatred ignited in its depths. Gemma gritted his teeth.

"All I care about is to see Tessai die. If you can promise me that you'll defeat him, I and my Hunters will follow you to the end."

Nephis was silent for a while, considering his words. Finally, she turned away and answered:

"Signal for your men to come. We have some food to share, so eat your fill. Prepare for tomorrow."

With that, she walked away.

Gemma stared at her back and yelled:

"What happens tomorrow?!"

Changing Star paused for a moment, then answered without turning her head:

"...Tomorrow, I will kill Tessai."

***

The next day, there were no scouts and no patrols sent out in the morning. Instead, everyone armed themselves, gathered together, and

marched to the throne room.

Nephis was walking at the head of her army, clad in the stark black and white armor of the Starlight Legion.

On her breastplate, seven shining stars were engraved.

The great hall was just as they had left it three weeks ago. During that time, members of all three factions had gathered the bodies of their dead to give them proper burials, but the white marble floor was still painted red with blood.

Tessai and his people were already waiting for them there.

The morose giant was sitting on the throne, looking down from its height. In his hands, there was a terrifying heavy mace, still wet from the slaughter.

Sunny grimaced, noticing the difference between the two armies.

Despite all their losses, there were still almost a hundred Guards left alive. Not only were they better equipped and trained than the slum dwellers, but now they also had the captured Artisans on their side, supplying them with all kinds of tools, gear, and deadly inventions.

The Artisans themselves were beside them, some of them bound and chained, some simply intimidated into submission. Their faces were pale, frightened, and bloodied. From their position in front of the Guards, it seemed as though Tessai was planning to use these poor people as a meat shield against Changing Star's assault.

The Handmaidens were also there, standing silently behind the guards. These quiet young women used to maintain the Castle and complete various chores around it, but they were capable fighters as well. Since they had not participated in the furious battle that had happened after Gunlaug's death, their number did not diminish by much. There were around a hundred of them, too.

Their leader, Seishan, was also there, at the base of the stairs that led to the throne. Looking at her, Sunny felt a cold shiver run down his spine.

He couldn't explain it, but this beautiful and strange woman made him feel fear for some reason.

At a first glance, Nephis had more people on her side. There were slightly more than three hundred of them, comprised mostly of the surviving slum dwellers, with several dozen tributaries and a dozen or so Hunters added into the mix.

…But really, only about a half of them was worth anything in the fight against the battle-hardened Guards.

Altogether, these were all the humans left alive in the Dark City. Just shy of six hundred.

Everyone else was already dead.

And how many more were going to die today?

Chapter-307: Throne of Light

Two forces stood against each other, the desecrated expanse of the great hall separating them… for now. The tense silence was full of bloodlust and dark apprehension.

Sunny slowly made his way to the first row of the crowd, staring at the opposing mass of armored warriors with a complicated expression. From his point of view, followers of Changing Star had little chance of winning this battle.

They simply had no advantage against the Castle Guard — with the exception of the fact that there were more bodies they could throw at the sharp blades of the enemy. Even if everyone here was mundane human, that would not have helped them prevail against a better-armed and trained force.

The fact that every single human in the throne room was a Sleeper only made things worse. The potential difference in power between two Awakened was much more vast than that between two mundane fighters.

And yet, he didn't think that Nephis was going to lose — for that same reason.

The Guards might have been better equipped and more experienced than the slum dwellers, but they didn't have Changing Star on their side. They didn't have Effie, Caster, and Gemma. They didn't have Sunny.

They only had two truly fearsome champions: Seishan and Tessai himself.

At the end of the day, the outcome of this battle was going to be decided by those few who stood out from the sea of Sleepers, impressive as everyone still surviving in the Dark City might have

been, like tall and unassailable cliffs. Among the Awakened, individual power was so much more important. And in terms of exceptional individuals, the Changing Star's side was far superior.

So yes, Sunny felt confident that Nephis was going to win.

But at what cost?

Out here on the Forgotten Shore, people had nowhere to retreat. So this battle was going to end only after one side was totally annihilated. And the closer to utter annihilation a faction would come, the more desperately its members would fight… like rats driven into a corner. When that happened, the bloodshed would only grow more terrible.

Was it only going to stop when just a handful of the strongest and most resilient were left alive?

As if reading his thoughts, Tessai suddenly chuckled and looked at the crowd of people gathered in the throne room with a bloodthirsty smile.

'Is… is that bastard actually looking forward to the slaughter?'

The morose giant then looked directly at Nephis and grinned:

"Changing Star. Ah, we meet again. But… wait. Who is that beside you? Is that Gemma, my old friend? What a pleasant surprise!

How considerate of you, to bring him here. Now I won't have to search the whole Castle for that filthy cockroach…"

With that, he slowly rose from the throne, put his terrifying mace on his shoulder, and descended from the stairs, dark fires igniting in his eyes.

"Have you come here to die, Changing Star?"

Nephis tilted her head and looked at Tessai with empty eyes.

"...No. I came here to kill you."

The giant laughed. Stepping on the marble floor, he stopped beside Seishan and bared his teeth in a vicious grin.

The two of them looked truly fearsome together. The morose giant was like an incarnation of destruction and violence. His skin had turned slightly blue because of the invisible icy barrier that encased it. The air in the throne room suddenly became colder, with tiny snowflakes dancing in the beams of light.

The mysterious leader of the Handmaidens was reserved and elegant, but no less frightening.

Seishan was exquisitely beautiful, cold, and inexorable. She was wearing a simple, but strangely regal dress, its velvet the color of red wine. There was an intricate silver necklace resting on her chest that accentuated her supple figure, and two bracelets on her wrists.

Her most striking feature, however, was not her grace and not her beauty, but her skin. It was grey like stormy clouds, smooth like silk, and devoid of any imperfections.

Just like Nephis, Seishan was one of those people whose appearance had been changed by their Aspect. But in her case, that change was far more pronounced. It gave her an exotic and tantalizing, but outwardly inhuman look.

Seishan's beauty was of the kind that put both longing and fear in a person's heart.

When Tessai approached, she silently summoned her weapon and stared coldly at the crowd of slum dwellers. Many of them shivered and hurriedly looked away.

A few moments later, a graceful war hammer appeared in her hand, one side of its head forged in the shape of a narrow beak.

The morose giant laughed.

"Kill me? Haven't you tried already? If memory serves, the last time we fought, you ran away like a cowardly dog. What makes you think that today is going to be different, bitch?"

Nephis raised her chin slightly and met his mocking gaze with silence.

Tessai shook his head.

"That look. I dreamed about wiping that arrogant look off your pretty face for a long time. Today, I am going to teach you how to beg, girl. So, what do you say? How about we finish this mess once and for all?"

The Guards standing behind him laughed and readied their weapons, looking at the slum dwellers opposing them with contempt and dark anticipation. Followers of Changing Star gritted their teeth, closing their ranks and preparing to charge.

The bloodshed was about to begin.

Nephis summoned her silver sword and answered Tessai, her voice cold and indifferent:

"...Let's."

For a moment, time slowed.

With a bestial smile, the giant stepped forward. He opened his mouth, ready to give his soldiers the command to attack.

A step behind, Seishan silently moved to follow him…

…And brought the beak of her war hammer on the back of Tessai's head, shattering his skull with one devastating strike.

At the same time, the Handmaidens who were standing behind the Guards attacked the unsuspecting men with long knives that appeared out of their sleeves. These knives were not Memories, and as such, did not take any time to weave themselves into reality or shine with ethereal light while doing so. Instead, they were fashioned out of steel, bone, and black obsidian.

Just a moment later, the blades plunged into the flesh of the Guards, ruthlessly slaughtering them. The Handmaidens were aiming for their throats, hearts, and eyes. Blood streamed on the marble floors once

again, and screams of terrified agony filled the air.

By the time Tessai's soldiers realized what was happening, it was already too late. They had no chance to resist the treacherous attack.

A dozen seconds later, everything was over. A hundred powerful fighters were mercilessly eviscerated without even having a chance to raise their weapons. Their corpses lay on the floor, a look of horror and disbelief forever frozen on their faces.

…Only Tessai was still alive.

Despite the fact that his skull was broken, the giant was still struggling to stand up, fury contorting the lines of his face. His disoriented attempts, however, were growing weaker with each second.

A confused, pained roar escaped from his lips.

As hundreds of Sleepers stared in shock and horror, Nephis slowly walked across the great hall and stopped near him.

Seishan, who was standing behind the giant, gave her a respectful bow.

"Lady Changing Star."

Sunny stared at her war hammer, which was wet with blood and bone matter, with splinters of bone sticking to its metal surface. An expression of recognition suddenly appeared on his face.

"The hammer… the mason's hammer…"

Held in Seishan's graceful hand was the sixth Shard Memory. One that belonged to the walking colossus, the statue of the Builder who had created the walls of the Dark City.

The Sunlight Shard.

Nephis gave the beautiful woman a curt nod.

"Good job."

Finally, the identity of the spy who had been helping her from within the Castle was revealed.

Then, she turned to the dying giant and stared at him. Neph's face was still and motionless, with no emotion appearing in her cold grey eyes. After a few moments, she said evenly:

"I promised to kill you."

With that, she raised her sword and pierced Tessai's heart with one swift, precise strike. The giant man shuddered, and then grew still.

Retrieving her sword, Nephis closed her eyes and used it to support her weight for a few moments. A slight tremor ran through her body.

The war for the throne was over.

The Bright Castle had finally found its new Lady.

Chapter-308: Handmaiden

In the aftermath of the Castle Guard's annihilation, the core members of the cohort gathered in a small room that was situated not far away from the great hall. From there, they could hear the bodies of the slain Guards being stripped of anything valuable and then dragged away to be disposed of... lest they attract the hordes of hungry Nightmare Creatures.

Just like that, the former most powerful faction of the Bright Castle was no more.

Judging by the expressions on everyone's faces, no one had been aware of the secret alliance between Nephis and the Handmaidens. Perhaps with the exception of Cassie.

But none of them dared to ask Changing Star about it.

Well, Sunny had no such problem.

Staring at their intrepid leader with a dubious expression, he said:

"So when did you start working with Seishan?"

Nephis glanced at him, then shrugged indifferently.

"Soon after you left."

A slight spark appeared in her eyes.

"Why? Are you surprised?"

Sunny remained silent for a bit, then shook his head.

"No, not really. I figured out that your spy was one of the lieutenants a long time ago. I just didn't know which one. But I thought that either your cooperation ended with Gunlaug's death, or that they

double-crossed you as soon as you got rid of him for them."

Changing Star smiled darkly.

"...She wouldn't."

Sunny frowned slightly, then asked, his voice full of cold, calculating curiosity:

"So why didn't she join your faction when all of this had started? Why go to such lengths to create this charade?"

But then, he raised his hand to stop her from answering and grimaced.

"Actually, don't say anything. I can guess. If the Handmaidens joined us directly, the power of the faction would have been too immense. And that would pressure the other three lieutenants into joining forces against it instead of fighting among each other. Then, we would have really had to end things with an all-out battle, the last man standing wins. Right?"

Nephis glanced at him and nodded.

"Correct."

'Not only did the two of them prevent Tessai and Gemma from considering an alliance, but they also eviscerated the Castle Guard without losing a single follower. How… diabolical.'

Even a treacherous cheat like Sunny couldn't help but be impressed.

However, there was one problem. His frown returned, now even deeper than before.

"If memory serves, the last time we talked about your spy you said that she can never be trusted. You only trusted the information she provided. Why the change of heart? How come you were so confident that she would uphold her end of the deal?"

A pleasant, velvety voice suddenly came from behind him.

"Maybe I can explain myself."

'What the hell?!'

With a startled expression, Sunny turned around and saw the beautiful woman standing right in front of him. Up close, she was even more striking, with her strange grey skin seemingly shining softly in the sunlight.

'How did she get so close without alerting neither me nor my shadow?'

He didn't like the fact that Seishan had been able to sneak up on him one bit. Things like that were not supposed to happen...

The gorgeous woman, meanwhile, gave them a reserved bow and said:

"Allow me to introduce myself. I am Song Sei Shan…"

Suddenly, Caster's eyes narrowed. A strange expression appeared on his face.

Sunny did not miss that sudden change.

'Well, the fact that our proud scion is reacting this way can mean only one thing. It's some Legacy crap.'

Sunny stared at Seishan, seeing her in a new light. He studied every detail of her appearance, from the modest cut of her velvet dress to the glinting silver of her intricate necklace.

She didn't look like a Legacy. At least not the ones he had seen.

However, one little detail of her appearance did give him pause...

Noticing his gaze, Seishan offered a polite smile.

"Ah. No, I am not a true descendant of the great clan Song. However, I have been raised and cared for by the Clan Leader herself, like many other girls orphaned by the Nightmare Spell. As such, it is my duty and ardent wish to return to the real world and repay my debt."

She lingered for a few seconds, then lowered her eyes.

"That is why, while you have no reason to trust in my character, you can at least trust in the fact that my wishes align with yours. I followed Gunlaug because only he was able to give people a chance to survive the Forgotten Shore. And I will follow Lady Changing Star, because only she can give us a chance to escape it. This is my belief, and this is what I will do.

She is Broken Sword's daughter, after all."

Without having to discuss anything, everyone stared at Kai, who coughed and said in an embarrassed tone:

"Uh… yeah. All of this is true. She is very sincere."

Effie raised an eyebrow, then turned to Seishan and shrugged:

"Well… welcome to the team, then? I guess."

One after another, the other members of the cohort repeated her greeting. Sunny was the last to speak.

When it was his turn to greet the beautiful Handmaiden, however, he remained quiet. Soon, an awkward silence hung in the room.

Sunny glanced at the rest of the people gathered there.

Nephis, Cassie, Effie, Caster, Kai, Seishan… and him.

Seven people in total...

A few moments later, he turned to Seishan and stared at her for a bit, then finally said, his voice strangely suppressed:

"Welcome."

She looked at him with a reserved smile.

However, Sunny wasn't done talking. Quickly glancing somewhere left of Seishan's face, he hesitated for a little, and then added:

"Oh, right! I almost forgot. I found something of yours. I think you

dropped it."

With that, he raised a hand. On his open palm, an intricate silver earring lay, one side of it covered with blood.

Seishan looked at it for a few moments. Then, her lips suddenly parted, her smile turning wide and brilliant.

Glancing at him with sparkling eyes, she said:

"Thank you very much... Sunny, right? I thought I lost it."

Her teeth were perfectly even, pearly, and spotlessly white.

Chapter-309: What Dreams May Come

In the next week or so, things moved with terrible speed.

Nephis became the ruler of the Bright Castle without any type of glorious ceremony or impassioned speech. No one questioned her authority, anyway, as though it was a simple fact of life.

In a sense, it was.

Sunny found it interesting, however, that she didn't take her seat on the white throne of the ancient citadel once. Even when there was a need for a large gathering, Changing Star sat on the last step of the stairs leading to the throne. As if making a point to show that the Bright Castle did not belong to her… or, perhaps, that she did not belong to the Bright Castle.

At first, he was sure that Nephis was going to push people to march on the Crimson Spire immediately, but she didn't even mention it. When he confronted her about her plans, she simply said that they were going to wait until the winter solstice came before making any decisions.

It was just a few days away, anyway. In the meantime, everyone who was left alive had a lot to do.

There were just five hundred people in the Dark City now. In less than a month, the human population of the Forgotten Shore had been reduced by half. The outer settlement remained completely abandoned, but even then, there were barely enough people to maintain and guard the Bright Castle.

Nevertheless, they persevered.

The halls and corridors of the ancient citadel were cleaned of blood and corpses. The Nightmare Creatures that had found their way inside were methodically hunted down and eliminated. The breaches in the defensive lines they had created were located and repaired.

Neph's watchmen assumed the role of the obliterated Castle Guard, manning the walls and protecting the stronghold from outside threats. The hunting parties resumed their expeditions into the ruins, with hunters from the outer settlement and the Castle joining forces under the leadership of Effie and Gemma. Once again, there was food for everyone to eat and safety to enjoy.

Despite the harrowing hollowness and the absence of so many young men and women who had died in the turmoil of the bloody struggle for the throne, not to mention the invisible scars left on the souls of those who had survived, things were slowly starting to resemble how they had been before.

But behind this veil of normalcy, they were anything but. And the reason for that was Changing Star and her Crown of Dawn.

With the help of the miraculous Shard Memory, humans of the Dark City were now able to not only hunt more Nightmare Creatures and with less risk, but also challenge Fallen rulers of the cursed ruins. Not every one of these terrifying creatures could be killed without paying too terrible a price, of course.

But after so many years on the Forgotten Shore, experienced Hunters knew a lot about various horrors populating the city. Putting the knowledge together, they determined which ones they could challenge and survive.

One after another, many powerful Nightmare Creatures were tracked down and slain. Suddenly, humans have become if not the apex species in the Dark City, then at least not the weakest one.

By killing Fallen abominations, Nephis was achieving several goals simultaneously. She was steadily accumulating an arsenal of Memories to arm every person in the Castle. Some of those Memories were even of the Ascended Rank, and the number of such powerful armaments slowly grew.

She and her warriors also brought back large quantities of soul shards, which were then given to the inhabitants of the Castle to absorb and grow stronger.

In an ironic twist of fate, it appeared as though now, it was the Bright Lady who was paying tribute to her subjects, and not the other way around.

This only made the respect and adoration people felt toward her grow stronger.

But most importantly, perhaps, was the fact that through these hunts, she was training her people to fight together as a cohesive force and prevail against creatures that were much more powerful than them.

Guided by Cassie, the surviving Artisans were hard at work, too. They were applying their mastery and craft to close any gaps in how the humans of the Dark City were equipped and supplied for the battle against the Dream Realm. However, the nature of their tasks was drastically different now.

If they had been in charge of maintaining the lifestyle of people living in the Castle as much as working to supply Gunlaug's Host with gear and equipment, now their only job was to create things people were going to need in battle.

It was as though they were preparing for war.

There were a few large projects that the Artisans were working on that Sunny knew little about, too. These things were requested from them by Nephis herself. He suspected that they were going to become useful once the time to attack the Crimson Spire finally came.

...Just like that, the winter solstice came.

On this day, exactly a year ago, Sunny had arrived on the Forgotten Shore. It was hard to believe that he had survived here for so long. That any of them had. But it also seemed as though one year was not enough to encompass it all.

It felt more like a lifetime. Several lifetimes, perhaps…

It was also on this day, a year later, that Sunny turned eighteen.

Remembering his previous birthday, a slight smile appeared on his lips. Back then, Cassie, who had been a complete stranger, offered him unexpected congratulations. He also made plans to celebrate his next birthday as an Awakened by drinking a cup of coffee with lots of milk and sugar.

Those dreams were not meant to come true.

Instead, Sunny met his eighteenth birthday in an empty hall of the Tower of Dusk, practicing the steps of the Shadow Dance, sweat streaming down his lithe and strong body.

These days, he felt that he was almost there. Just a little bit more, and the first level of mastery over his mysterious Aspect Legacy would be his. It was already in reach.

One more thing happened on that day.

As Sunny continued to train, the subtly familiar voice of the Spell suddenly whispered into his ear:

[...Your Shadow has evolved.]

Chapter-310: Shadow Demon

Lowering his sword, Sunny stood in the silence of the empty room for a while. In the window, the distant axis of the Crimson Spire loomed, the light of dawn slowly painting it red.

A subtle smile appeared on his face.

"Aww. Thank you, Spell. What a nice birthday present."

Summoning the Endless Spring, he greedily drank delicious cold water and then sat on the floor, crossing his legs and drawing a few deep breaths.

'Let's take a look…'

Leaving his worries behind, Sunny dove into the Soul Sea and walked past the rows of motionless shadows.

A long time ago, there had been just a handful of them. Now, hundreds of dark silhouettes watched silently as he approached the tenebrous sun of the Shadow Core. Among them were all kinds of horrors, creatures whose appearance alone would drive weaker men insane. The Mountain King was there. The Black Knight was there, too.

The terrifying Spire Messenger stood lifelessly on the tranquil surface of the water.

…And there were humans, too. Harus was among them, and so was Harper.

Sunny didn't pay them any attention.

Standing beneath the Shadow Core, he sighed and summoned the runes.

Name: Sunless.

True Name: Lost from Light.

Rank: Dreamer.

Shadow Core: Dormant.

Shadow Fragments: [977/1000].

…He was so close to accumulating the whole thousand. If Sunny really wanted to, he could have abandoned caution and pushed to reach it before the inevitable journey to the Crimson Spire. However, he was wary of delving into anything unknown right before the fateful confrontation.

He also felt that his time was better spent consolidating and perfecting everything that he had already learned and earned, not wasting it trying to acquire something new.

Still, it was not an easy decision.

With a sigh, he continued reading.

Memories: [Silver Bell], [Puppeteer's Shroud], [Midnight Shard], [Ordinary Rock], [Prowling Thorn], [Endless Spring], [Blood Blossom], [Dark Wing], [Moonlight Shard], [M… …old], [Weaver's Mask].

Echoes: —

Shadows…

He tilted his head and read, an amused expression appearing on his face:

...[Marble Saint].

…Marble?

'How fitting…'

Without wasting any more time, he summoned his Shadow from the

depths of the Core. She appeared in a whirlwind of black flames, standing in front of him with her usual taciturn aloofness.

However, Sunny couldn't help but gasp.

The Saint was indeed changed. She grew taller and was now even more oppressive. Her graceful stonelike armor, which had looked as though it was cut from granite before, was now entirely black and glossy, like obsidian… or onyx. In fact, it was very much like the shattered onyx armor he had purchased with Kai's help.

Her skin, on the contrary, became smooth and as white as alabaster… at least the small portion of it he could see through the visor of the helmet.

Saint seemed much stronger, aware, deadly…

But that was not what made Sunny gasp.

The thing that stunned him was what hid beneath the armor. Within the shadow that populated Saint's body, there used to be two ethereal dark embers.

But now, there were three.

Sunny stared at her for a while.

'Did she… rise to a higher class?'

Finally, he calmed down and made the runes describing the Shadow appear. A moment later, his hopes were proved true:

Shadow: Marble Saint.

Shadow Rank: Awakened.

Shadow Class: Demon.

'Demon! She is a Shadow Demon now…'

Shadow Attributes: [Battle Master], [Stalwart], [Spark of Divinity].

The next line had not been there before. Sunny held his breath.

Shadow Abilities: [Weapon Sage], [Underworld Armament].

He lingered for a moment, trying to suppress a triumphant smile.

He had always known that Saint was not a typical Nightmare Creature. But to think that she would acquire an actual Ability before even becoming a devil… and not just one, but two!

Burning with anticipation, he read on:

Weapon Sage Ability Description: [Shadow Saint can effectively wield any weapon-type Memory.]

Underworld Armament Ability Description: [Shadow Saint's armor can accommodate a charm Memory to inherit its enchantments.]

Sunny was silent for a bit, then turned his head and stared at the taciturn monster… no, not monster.

Demon.

A satisfied smile finally appeared on his face.

"Ah. How wonderful…"

Not only had his Shadow grown tremendously stronger, but she now also had the ability to use any weapon he would provide for her, as well as reinforce her armor with all kinds of powerful enchantments.

The possibilities this could provide her were truly endless. The potential combinations, the flexibility… all it took was to find proper Memories.

Sunny shook his head and grinned.

Before, he had sometimes thought that Saint was really suited to command an army.

But now, he understood that he had been wrong.

…She was the army.

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A few hours later, the members of Neph's cohort gathered on the roof of the old hunting lodge, which still stood at the edge of the slum. Seishan was also there, which made Sunny slightly uncomfortable. He didn't let it show on his face, however.

The outer settlement was desolate and empty. There were no desperate, hungry youths around anymore — all of them were now either safely hidden behind the castle walls… or dead.

It was just the seven of them. They came to see Kai off.

The charming archer was standing near the edge of the roof, checking his equipment for the last time. He was wearing a new stylish armor and a leather jacket with fur on its collar. On his back, there was a quiver full of arrows and a backpack with water, food, and other supplies necessary for a long journey.

Sunny didn't know about the rest, but his heart was heavy.

As though reading his thoughts, Kai turned around and smiled.

"Really, guys, don't worry. I'll be fine. This is not my first time spending some quality time in the Labyrinth."

No one answered, knowing that the mission entrusted to Nightingale this time was especially dangerous... but also important.

He had to leave the Dark City and explore the vastness of the Forgotten Shore in search of new humans sent here by the Spell.

Today was the day of the winter solstice, and that meant that out there in the real world, thousands upon thousands of Sleepers were currently preparing to enter the pods and arrive in the Dream Realm.

Sunny sighed.

"Just don't bring back anyone as irritating as you, alright?"

Kai chuckled.

"...No promises."

With that, he waved them goodbye.

"Well… wish me luck!"

A few moments later, he was gone, turning into a small dot in the sky.

The remaining six people stared at it for a long time, their faces somber.

Their future depended on what Kai would discover.

Theirs and that of everyone else still clinging to life on the Forgotten Shore.

Chapter-311: The Last

A few days passed in tense anticipation. Sunny spent them doing the same things he had been doing before: training and preparing mentally for what was about to come.

He had a lot of things to do.

First came his technique, which was based on the flowing battle style that Nephis had taught him, with elements of Shadow Saint's grounded style added to its adaptive foundation. His skill was growing sharper and sharper, slowly being elevated and solidified at the level that his current understanding of combat allowed.

Sunny was not a novice anymore. He survived hundreds of deadly battles, and each left him stronger and more experienced than he had been before.

But perfecting his technique was still not easy, because he had to make himself indomitable first, and then turn that firmness into flexibility.

Now that Sunny finally had free time, he also used it to adapt his style to the new reality of his improved physical limits. Many things that had not been possible for him before the journey to the Hollow Mountains became possible now. The way he approached combat had to change, too.

All of it took effort and a lot of thought to achieve.

Second came the Shadow Dance. Sunny was still at the stage where he was slowly forming a practical set of moves to train in that elusive style. He felt as if he was now only one final step away from turning his vision of the Shadow Dance into reality. However, he seemed to be lacking some crucial ingredient. He needed one last push, one moment of inspiration to make that final step.

Still, his exercises weren't useless. Until that moment of inspiration came, they helped condition his body and mind, make them adaptable and malleable like shadows. When the last revelation appeared, they would be able to receive it.

After each intense training session, every muscle in his body ached, and a wave of mental fatigue washed over him.

Third came the most important task. He had to turn his mind and soul into a fortress that would withstand the shock of the future.

He had to achieve the type of clarity that would allow him to emerge victorious on the other end of it all, and for now, this task was turning out to be the most unattainable.

It was hard to shape one's body and mind into a perfect tool, but it was so much harder to do the same with one's soul. However, this was exactly the barrier he had to overcome.

Just like that, six days passed.

…On the seventh day after his departure, Kai finally returned. The charming young man seemed tired and ragged, his armor and clothes covered in dirt, dust, and dried blood. The quiver of arrows he had taken with him was now empty, and there were shallow cuts on the fabric of his jacket.

Sunny's shadow had kept watching the skies above the Bright Castle all this time, so he was one of the first to know.

By the time Sunny arrived at the small room that served as Neph's council chamber, Kai was already there, sitting by the fire and greedily drinking water from a crude clay cup. Effie was by his side, pushing a plate of food into his hands.

Noticing him, Kai smiled weakly.

"Hey, Sunny."

Sunny hesitated for a bit, then approached the beautiful young man and patted him on the shoulder.

"Hey, Kai. Welcome back."

Neither he nor Effie spoke after that, giving their friend an opportunity to catch his breath and waiting for the rest to come.

One after another, Cassie, Caster, and Seishan appeared in the room and greeted Kai. Nephis was the last to enter.

She glanced at everyone and then sat down near Kai. After hesitating for a few moments, she looked him in the eyes and asked:

"How many?"

Kai remained silent for a while, a solemn expression slowly appearing in his eyes. Finally, he turned away and sighed. One word escaped his lips:

"...None."

His voice echoed in the small room, making the faces of people gathered there darken.

"I scoured the Labyrinth, looking for any sign that a Sleeper passed there recently. But there were none. There was no one alive and no bodies, not even a single fresh bone that I could find. The Spell… it did not send anyone to this hell, not this year."

'And it won't the next one, too. Just as I thought.'

Sunny sighed. Sometimes, it was nice to be mistaken.

Fifteen years ago, the Spell had sent seven people to the Forgotten Shore. The next year, it had been twice as much, and then more and more. Eventually, hundreds of Sleepers had been arriving in the Dark City after each winter solstice… up until last year, when only four of them — Sunny, Nephis, Cassie, and Caster — had come.

Three more had perished in the Labyrinth without ever reaching the cursed ruins.

Because of that, inhabitants of the Bright Castle came up with a theory that the number of people sent to this region of the Dream

Realm by the Spell followed a certain cycle. If they had been right, then at least fourteen Sleepers would have appeared somewhere in the Labyrinth a week ago.

But Sunny never believed in that theory.

In his mind, the four of them had never been meant to start a new cycle. He had always thought that, instead, they were meant to be the last.

The last chance the Spell had given to the people of the Forgotten Shore.

And now, he knew that he had been right.

With a sigh, Nephis slowly nodded and stared at the fire burning in the hearth for a bit. Everyone stood silently, waiting for her to make a decision.

Finally, she said without looking at them:

"...Tell everyone to gather in the throne room. I will speak to them."

Without wasting any time, Caster bowed slightly and left the room. Effie gave her a short look, and then followed him. So did the rest.

Sunny was the last one to leave, his heart beating like a drum.

'It is beginning!'

Chapter-312: Invisible Chains

Five hundred people stood silently in the magnificent great hall of the ancient castle. Beams of sunlight were falling through the tall windows, making the air appear bright and effervescent.

There was no sign left of the terrible bloodshed that had happened in this hall just a few weeks ago. The bodies were dragged away, the blood washed off the marble floors.

But the memory of it remained.

On the steps leading to a beautiful throne of white marble sat a young woman with silver hair. Her ivory face was distant, and her clear grey eyes were calm and heavy. Hundreds of people were looking at her, waiting quietly for their lady to speak.

Finally, Changing Star sighed. A moment later, her voice resounded in the throne room, reaching far and wide:

"Dreamers of the Forgotten Shore. A week ago, I sent several scouts into the Labyrinth to look for those young men and women who, like us, were sent to this cursed place. Among them was Nightingale, whom you all know. He spent seven days searching for them. But he didn't find anyone. Not even a single sign of their passing.

This year… no one has come."

A wave of stunned whispers ran through the crowd. Sunny glanced at the faces of people gathered in the great hall, noticing different expressions on them. Confusion, fear, shock. However, it wasn't as bad as he had expected. No one seemed to become consumed by utter despair.

Instead, all of them turned to Nephis, hope burning in their eyes.

She was their hope. Until Changing Star was with them, they weren't going to give in to despair.

Indifferent to hundreds of eyes observing her every move, Neph continued:

"Many of you understand what that means. To those who don't, I will explain."

She lingered for a moment, throwing a glance at the walls of the ancient citadel. When she spoke, her voice seemed solemn:

"For many years, this castle served as a fortress for the humans sent to the Forgotten Shore. Some of you enjoyed the safety it offered, while others survived in the shadow of its walls. But none of us would have been here if not for the Bright Castle. It offered us protection against the dreadful beasts of the Dark City. It offered us shelter. However, this shelter was never free."

A dark expression appeared on her face.

"Some people lost their souls to preserve it. And many more lost their lives. Every year, hundreds of human lives were sacrificed to allow the Bright Castle to exist. And every year, hundreds more came to be thrown into its maw."

Sunny silently scoffed. She was making it sound as though the Castle was some creature that fed on human lives… not unlike the Soul Devourer, really. The meaning was subtle enough to not be obvious, but still affect the people gathered in the throne room. Observing them, he saw many Sleepers shiver and frown.

'...Insidious.'

Meanwhile, Nephis continued:

"But no more. There won't be anyone coming to the Dark City this year, just like no one will come after that. Without new people, the losses we suffer will slowly accumulate, until there is no one to man the walls, no one to fight off the Nightmare Creatures, no one to keep these halls safe. Until there is no more shelter. This end…"

She made a pause, and then said calmly and with frightening finality:

"...is inevitable."

Her words crashed into the crowd of Sleepers, causing a storm of emotions. Their eyes widened and their faces paled. The shock and fear they had felt grew tenfold.

As if to hammer the last nail into the coffin of their worldview, Changing Star said:

"Which means only one thing. We cannot remain in the Bright Castle anymore."

Screams rose from the crowd, full of disbelief and terror. There were many things people were trying to say, but they all boiled down to three:

"What do we do?!"

"How do we save ourselves?!"

…And:

"Save us, Changing Star!"

Sunny smiled.

Nephis remained silent for a while, letting the chorus of screams wash over her. And then, white flames ignited in her eyes, making everyone fall silent. Her voice resounded once more between the walls of the great hall, penetrating through the crowd like a sharp blade:

"But this not the end of us. A long time ago, I made you a promise. And I intend to keep it."

She suddenly rose, towering over the crowd like a shining, ruinous angel.

"Come with me! Follow me. Only I know how to save you."

The radiance of her flames reflected in the eyes of hundreds of people, making it seem as though their faces shone with an inner light. Her words had submerged them into utter darkness, and then gave them a beacon to find a way out of it.

That beacon burned with the most seductive of lights.

The light of hope.

And that hope was synonymous with her.

Changing Star slowly descended from the steps, her words echoing from the marble walls of the throne room:

"Follow me, and I will lead you out of this hell. Follow me, and I will show you the path back to your homes. But make no mistake…"

She stopped and remained silent for a few long moments. When she spoke again, her voice sounded calmer, colder…

Heavier.

"The road ahead will be long and arduous. Not everyone will make it. The weak will die. The strong will die, too. And those who remain won't be the same. But there is one thing I can promise you…"

Nephis entered the crowd and looked at the people surrounding her with absolute resolve burning in her beautiful eyes.

"Follow me… and you will never be slaves."

Sunny shivered, feeling as though she was speaking to him alone. Everyone in the great hall felt the same way, perhaps.

Staring directly into their souls, Changing Star spoke:

"...Slaves to your fear, slaves to your fate, slaves to the Nightmare Spell. Come with me, and whether you live or die, you will do so as humans. Not cowering beasts."

She closed her eyes and exhaled, then looked down. Finally, she said, the passion disappearing from her voice:

"But… I will not force anyone to follow me. Ever. Whether you come with me or stay, it is your choice. There is no shame in staying. Those who do not wish to go may leave this hall right now."

Sunny looked at the Sleepers, trying to guess what their reaction would be. People were staring at each other, doubt and fear written on their faces.

Not everyone was enthralled by Changing Star. Not everyone was brave and strong. Not everyone was ready to die fighting.

…But in the end, not a single one of them left.

Nephis sighed and slowly turned her head west, as though trying to pierce the stone of the castle walls with her gaze. After a while, she said:

"Good. I am glad. Then it's decided."

She turned to face them, furious white flames illuminating her pale face:

"Then the day after tomorrow… we will leave the Bright Castle. The day after tomorrow, we march on the Crimson Spire!"

Chapter-313: Starlight Shard

On the last day they would spend in the Dark City, Nephis led a small group of her most powerful warriors on one last hunt.

The members of her cohort were all following behind her. Sunny, who stubbornly refused to accept his status as one of them, walked apart from the group, idly looking around and observing the ruins.

Gemma and Seishan were also with them, as well as ten or so of the most experienced hunters — some of them formerly from the Host, some formerly from the outer settlement. There was no difference between the two anymore.

All of them were simply Changing Star's people now.

As they were walking, Gemma approached Sunny and glanced at him with curiosity.

After Tessai had fallen to Neph's blade, the tall man seemed to have found some measure of peace. Somewhere deep in his eyes, however, there always was a hint of sorrow.

Sunny stared at him and raised an eyebrow.

"What?"

The hunter smiled slightly and asked in a friendly tone:

"You're Sunless, right?"

Sunny shrugged.

"Yeah, that's me."

Gemma silently measured him and then asked with interest:

"I've heard that you lived for months alone in the city. Is that true?"

'Ah, makes sense.'

The tall man was perhaps the most experienced hunter on the Forgotten Shore. He had survived countless battles on the streets of the cursed city. It was natural for him to be curious about this matter…

Sunny gave him a nod.

"Sure. A little over three months, I guess."

Gemma rubbed his chin, then asked bluntly:

"How did you survive?"

Sunny grinned.

How had he managed that, indeed?

"...Lots of hiding, lots of killing. A modicum of madness, and a little bit of luck."

Gemma stared at him for a bit, then chuckled.

"Sound about right, I guess."

After a while, he glanced forward at Changing Star and asked in a curious tone:

"Do you know what we are going to hunt today?"

Sunny looked at him with surprise:

"She didn't tell you?"

The tall man hesitated, then shook his head.

"She did. I'm just not sure that I believe it."

Sunny smiled and looked away.

"Ah, let me guess. Your first thought was that she had lost her mind. What can I say… get used to that feeling."

After a few moments of silence, Gemma sighed.

"But how can we kill it?"

'Poor guy…'

Sunny glanced at him, lingered for a bit, and then said:

"If my guess is correct, you know more about it than I do."

And just like that, their conversation ended.

By the middle of the day, they reached the eastern edges of the city and climbed the imposing monolith of the great wall. Standing on top of it, they saw the colossal crater and the headless statue that stood not too far away, its one remaining hand thrust toward the skies.

Their prey was hiding in a vast underground chamber beneath that statue.

Today, they were going to hunt the Lord of the Dead.

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At the base of the statue, the second arm of the Priestess lay in the mud. Thousands of years ago, it had broken off and fallen, crashing through the dome of the underground chamber. Now, there was a chasm in the ground that led into the lair of the Lord of the Dead.

Many months ago, Sunny and the rest had used that breach to escape from the catacombs. Now, they were going to use it to descend into that darkness, instead.

The ghastly master of the catacombs waited for them below. Sunny wasn't really surprised that Nephis had chosen to return to this place. After all, the mountainous abomination was most likely guarding the last of the seven Shard Memories.

However, he was really curious about how exactly she was planning

to kill it.

Once everyone gathered around the hole in the mud, Changing Star glanced at him and said:

"Sunny, can your shadow take a look at the burial chamber?"

With a shrug, he sent the shadow into the breach. It slid on the mud and entered the dark hole, then hid in the palm of the giant stone hand and cautiously looked down.

The mountain of human bones was still there, in the middle of the vast circular chamber.

However, it looked very different from how it had been before.

Countless green vines were growing from the mass of bones, some of them comparatively thin, others as thick as a human body. They weren't growing just between the ancient remains: the vines were bursting through the bones, too. Almost as if feeding on them.

The Lord of the Dead seemed… weaker. More brittle. As though it was sick, sapped of its strength and infected by a terrible parasite.

Sunny commanded his shadow to look closer, and finally noticed the thing that he had expected to see.

A small wooden box lay on the floor of the underground chamber, open and empty. The exact same box Nephis had mysteriously entrusted to Caster as soon as they were back in the Dark City.

From the words of the outer settlement hunter, that box had appeared on his pillow with a small note. That note had been written by Changing Star's spy — Seishan. And the contents of the box had been created for her by Kido, who was now dead.

Kido had been the leader of the Artisans. Her Aspect Ability allowed her to control and alter plants.

This bone-eating vine, as it turned out, was her last creation and final masterpiece.

Turning to Nephis, Sunny hesitated for a moment and then spoke, his words causing a subtle reaction in Gemma:

"The tyrant is heavily infected by Kido's vine. It seems to be considerably weakened."

Changing Star nodded and remained silent for a few moments. Then, she said:

"Once we enter the chamber, the Lord of the Dead will attack us. Now that its power is reduced, and with the help of the Dawn Shard, we should be able to survive the onslaught. We should also be able to wound, and eventually kill it."

Looking at the faces of everyone gathered in the shadow of the headless statue, she nodded and headed toward the breach.

"Let's go."

***

Soon, Sunny was trying to survive the fury of the Lord of the Dead once again. But this time, it was not as hard as it had been before.

He had become stronger, and the horrible creature had become weaker. His Memories were augmented by the Crown of Dawn, and Saint was now a demon.

There were also more humans resisting the tyrant today.

…That was not to say that the battle wasn't harrowing and perilous. In fact, it was utterly lethal.

The humans fighting the monumental Nightmare Creature were surrounding it, dodging the long limbs of the tyrant and trying to attack it when an opportunity presented itself. Kai was zipping in the air, providing support and bringing the wounded away from the fight.

They were only alive because the attacks of the Lord of the Dead were now slower and less devastating than before. With some preparation, both Effie and Saint could withstand one or two with the

help of their shields. Caster was able to deliver several cuts to it with his ghostly blade, while Seishan had broken one limb completely with her graceful war hammer.

Each strike of the Sunlight Shard seemed to bring immense pain to the Lord of the Dead.

But nothing hurt it more, of course, than the incandescent blade of Changing Star.

Together, they dealt more and more damage to the terrible creature, despite the fact that many of them were now either severely wounded or dead. The tyrant was being consumed from within by the green vines, and broken from the outside by their weapons.

And then, after a long and arduous battle, a huge layer of bones fell from the body of the Lord of the Dead, revealing its inner core.

That core, which was made of human skulls and coagulated blood, was absolutely terrifying, malignant, and abhorrent. In its depth, a shape of a fat white maggot could be seen, curled into a ball.

At that moment, Effie suddenly stepped forward, twisted her body… and threw the Dusk Shard as a discus with a deafening cry.

The shield that was said to contain the weight of the heavens streaked through the air with terrible speed and hit the inner core of the tyrant, crushing through it like a wrecking ball. It cut the maggot in half and exited the body of the Lord of the Dead from the other side in a torrent of broken bones.

Then it fell to the ground, shattering the stone floor of the chamber and sending a net of cracks running through it from the point of impact.

The mountain of bones froze, then shuddered.

And then, it crumbled.

Everyone stared at Effie, shocked, hope burning in their eyes.

On her face, there was a dark, mournful expression. Belatedly, Sunny

remembered that the members of the original cohort that the boisterous huntress had belonged to all perished here, killed either by the undead army or the Lord of the Dead itself.

A few moments later, Effie sighed and turned her face away, hiding it from everyone. Then, she raised a hand and made it into a fist.

That was her letting them know that she had received a Memory from the kill.

A Shard Memory.

The last one there was.

Chapter-314: Leaving the Dark City

After everything was done and Nephis used her flames to heal those who survived, they returned to the city through the catacombs.

Perhaps she wished to eviscerate the army of undead monsters that were now left without the tyrant to bring them back to life. But in the end, they were met with nothing but silence.

The horde of ferocious skeletons that had once almost cost Sunny and the rest of the cohort their lives was no more. The dark tunnels stretching beneath the ruins were littered with piles of bones, which were slowly turning into dust. It seemed as though the moment the Lord of the Dead had been destroyed, its servants had perished, too.

After a while, the group of humans emerged from the collapsed tower of the lighthouse and continued on its way back to the Bright Castle.

They were going to spend their last night there before leaving the Dark City behind.

***

In a small room in the depths of the ancient citadel, seven people gathered around a table.

They were Sunny, Nephis, Cassie, Caster, Effie, Kai, and Seishan.

Beyond the walls of the castle, the absolute darkness of the night had devoured the world. Nightmare Creatures were prowling the cursed ruins, and somewhere far away, black waves were crashing against the indomitable granite surface of the city wall.

Inside, the cold light of a Memory lantern illuminated their faces.

Strangely, everyone was silent, as though not sure what to say. Finally, Sunny broke the silence by yawning loudly.

"Shall we get on with this? Tomorrow is going to be a long day, and some of us need their beauty sleep."

He threw a sideways glance at Kai, thought for a bit, and then added:

"Actually, every day after today is going to be a long one. So let's just do it."

Nephis stared at him for a few moments, then echoed his words:

"...Do it."

With that, they summoned their Memories.

An austere tachi and a ghostly stiletto appeared in Sunny's hands.

A graceful war hammer with a narrow beak appeared in Seishan's.

Effie summoned her beautiful bronze spear and a heavy round shield.

Finally, a simple band of metal decorated with a single gem weaved itself from light and rested gently on Changing Star's head.

They were the Shard Memories.

Dawn, Zenith, Dusk, Midnight, Sunlight, Moonlight…

…And Starlight.

The last Memory was a short, flowing white cloak that draped itself around Effie's shoulders. This was the Shard she had received after slaying the Lord of the Dead.

For a few moments, no one moved. Then, Effie said:

"So, uh… what now?"

Nephis tilted her head a little, then frowned. Finally, after some time passed, she said:

"Come closer."

When they did, something unexpected happened. Sunny felt the hilts of his weapons suddenly growing hotter, and soon, both Midnight and Moonlight Shard began emanating a ghostly, ethereal light. The same was happening to the other shards.

Seven beams of light shot toward the center of the room and collided. Then, they fused with each other, and soon, seven objects weaved themselves from that light and hovered in the air.

They were keys forged out of lustrous metal, with seven shining stars engraved on their surface.

It was the manifestation of the terrible oath that the seven heroes had given all those thousands of years ago. The keys that were used to seal the curse of the all-consuming darkness underground.

Suddenly, the seven keys turned into streams of light and shot toward each of the seven people gathered in the room.

One beam hit Sunny in the chest and disappeared, absorbed into his core.

The voice of the Spell resounded in his ears:

[...You have received an Oath Key.]

Sunny shivered. He didn't want anything to do with that morbid oath.

…But in the end, he had no other choice.

Glancing at the rest of the people gathered in the room, Changing Star lingered for a moment, and then said:

"We're ready."

***

In the dim light of dawn, the gates of the castle opened for the last time. A long procession of humans walked through them, leaving the ancient citadel that had sheltered them for so long.

They walked under the swinging skulls, not paying them any attention. In the aftermath of all the strife, no one had bothered to remove the ghastly things from their chains.

It was not like anyone could have forgotten the hundreds of lives lost in the struggle, and thousands of deaths before that, even if the skulls were removed.

Five hundred people descended the hill and entered the Dark City. A few Nightmare Creatures tried to attack them, and were eviscerated before managing to do any harm.

These five hundred humans were not a defenseless crowd. They were a battle-hardened army, one comprised of exceptionally powerful Sleepers… the most powerful Sleepers to ever be born from the human race, perhaps.

They moved through the ruins, cutting down anything that dared to block their path. Soon, the Sleepers approached the western boundary of the Dark City and scaled the ancient wall.

There, they stopped and turned, staring at the silhouette of the Bright Castle in solemn silence.

…By then, pillars of black smoke were billowing from each of its windows. Soon, the whole castle was enveloped by furious flames, which slowly devoured the white stone of its walls. The magnificent marble cracked and melted, destroyed by the terrible heat. The smaller towers swayed and moved, and then fell into the terrible crucible.

The fire was slowly destroying the Bright Castle, turning it into a molten ruin.

In a sense, this was fitting. After all, everything else in the Dark City had been ruined a long, long time ago.

Surprisingly, this act of destruction was not Changing Star's idea. She wasn't the one who ordered to burn the Bright Castle behind them, like a final gesture to hammer it into everyone's souls that there was no way back anymore. Sunny would have expected something like

that from Nephis.

But no, it was the decision of the people themselves.

They wanted to destroy the ancient citadel, because they hated it. They hated these ancient, bloodsoaked stones only a little bit less than they needed them to survive.

And now that they were leaving, they wanted to erase the Bright Castle from existence. Perhaps if it was gone, the memories of all the darkness that they had witnessed there, and were the perpetrators of, would disappear with it.

After a while, the misshapen, twisted silhouette of the dying fortress was completely hidden by the fire and smoke. Slowly, the silent Sleepers turned away from that sight and looked far away into the distance.

They were looking west.

That was where they were going.

To lay siege to the Crimson Spire.

One after another, the Sleepers descended from the wall and left the Dark City behind.

Chapter-315: Siege of the Crimson Spire (1)

In the cold light of dawn, a gargantuan crimson tower was rising from the Labyrinth. From this distance, it looked like a bloodied sword that some primordial titan had thrust into the heavens.

The crimson coral streamed from its walls like the blood of gods, spreading out from the base of the Spire to devour all of the Forgotten Shore. The tower itself seemed to stand on an island, which was surrounded from all sides by black water. Even though the sun was already climbing up, this part of the cursed sea did not disappear.

Instead, it lingered and moved endlessly, forming a giant whirlpool. Unclear shapes could be seen moving under the surface of the black water, drowning the hearts of humans who dared to approach the Spire with dread.

Sunny looked up, at the endless expanse of the crimson tower, and paled. Up close, it looked even more ominous, oppressive, and terrifying. He struggled to believe that this cyclopean structure had been built by human hands, let alone that it had been their salvation once, a long time ago.

Now, the Crimson Spire looked nothing but twisted, eerie, and utterly evil. It emanated a sense of harrowing power that no human could ever hope to challenge.

And yet, this was exactly what they were going to do.

Turning away, he glanced at the camp of the Dreamer Army.

For the past week, the five hundred of them had traversed the Labyrinth to reach this place. Some had perished along the way, but

not as many as he had expected. For that short journey, luck had been on their side.

In these days, they had slaughtered countless Nightmare Creatures and somehow managed to avoid attracting the wrath of the dwellers of the deep. They had seen the headless statue of the Lord that stood halfway between the Dark City and the Crimson Spire, and many other wondrous and terrible things.

And now, they had almost reached their goal.

People were busy preparing for the battle. The dread they had felt at dawn, after looking at the Crimson Spire, which was now so close, turned into grim determination and resolve. Everyone was making final preparations. Some were checking their armor and weapons for the last time. Some were hurriedly building makeshift fortifications.

Some were praying, begging the dead gods to save their lives.

Truth be told, Sunny was the only person who appeared to be idle.

Well, what did they expect? Nephis still had not told him what exactly his role in the battle was going to be. Not that he was obligated to listen, of course…

With a sigh, he turned to the other members of the cohort, who were gathered around a fire, discussing the plan of the battle for the hundredth time. Everyone seemed uncharacteristically somber today.

One after another, they left to join in the preparations. Soon, Changing Star was the only one left.

With a bit of reluctance, Sunny approached her and sat down, staring at the fire. After a while, he said:

"This is very strange, don't you think?"

She glanced at him and raised an eyebrow.

Nephis had changed a lot since the first time they met, but also remained exactly the same. She was still calm and confident, with ivory skin and beautiful silver hair. She was still strong and full of

conviction.

It's just that her eyes seemed a bit hollow these days.

"What is?"

Sunny shrugged.

"Just… all of it. If someone described this scene to me a year ago, I would have been really perplexed. And yet, here we are."

He lingered for a bit, and then added:

"We've come very far. The three of us."

Both of them glanced at Cassie, who was busy explaining something to the Artisan representatives. Her delicate hand rested on the hilt of the Quiet Dancer.

After a while, Nephis nodded.

"Yes. And now, we just need to make one last step."

Both of them remained silent for a bit, thinking about how this final step was going to be the hardest yet. Incomparably so…

Then, Sunny sighed:

"So, what do you want me to do? From how you kept avoiding the subject for these past days, I'm guessing that it's not something trivial."

Changing Star smiled, then looked at him with white sparks dancing in her eyes.

"A really small thing, really."

Then, she turned to face the Crimson Spire, hesitated for a while, and then suddenly said:

"...Give me your hand."

When Sunny did, something traveled through her cool skin into his

Shadow Core. He summoned the runes and looked at them, already knowing what he was going to see. And there it was, listed among his Memories:

Oath Key: [7].

Somehow, she had gathered the remaining six keys from the rest. And now, she was entrusting them to Sunny.

Still looking at the cyclopean tower, Nephis said:

"...I want you to destroy the dark sea. Or banish it, at least."

Sunny grinned.

"A really small thing, indeed."

***

Very soon, the sun rose higher, and the dark whirlpool surrounding the Crimson Spire became a little smaller. Several bridges of red coral rose from its depths, connecting the island to the rest of the Forgotten Shore.

And out there on the island, countless silhouettes suddenly began to move, crawling out of the crimson mounds. They were the Nightmare Creatures guarding the cursed tower.

All kinds of horrors were among them. There were members of the carapace legion: scavengers, centurions, and demons. There were colonies of carnivorous worms, giant centipedes that secreted corrosive oil, and eerie vines that crawled on the ground like snakes.

There were creatures that looked like black masses of rotten bones, and creatures that looked like humanoids made of rock, with terrible maws full of jagged fangs. There were swarms of translucent insects that devoured everything in their path and massive spiders clad in iron armor.

There were beasts that could shoot deadly bone spears from their bodies and beasts that could turn their prey to stone with their gaze.

There were corpses with red flowers growing from the holes in their flesh and giant abominations that resembled praying mantises, if those were made of glass and bloodred clay.

And many more that Sunny had never seen, fought, or could describe.

All of them moved together in strange harmony, devoid of the usual territorial aggression that forced the Nightmare Creatures of different tribes to fight each other. They were subjugated by the Crimson Terror and now served to guard the Spire.

Like a terrible wave, the horde of monsters rolled over the bridges of crimson coral and flowed toward the human army.

From his position at the back of it, Sunny could clearly see the bodies of those standing in the front line tremble and take an involuntary step back. Someone even dropped their weapon. A moment later, Effie's loud voice rolled over the rows of Sleepers:

"Stand your ground, wretches! If anyone runs, I'll kill you myself!"

Strangely, her irritated shout calmed down the fear in their hearts.

A moment later, however, it was drowned in the cacophony of the approaching horde.

...The battle for the Crimson Spire had begun.

Chapter-316: Siege of the Crimson Spire (2)

On the outskirts of the Crimson Spire, there were no more passages and tunnels in the coral. It was just a solid red mass, an unbroken surface of the strange living substance that had devoured the Forgotten Shore thousands of years ago.

Currently, Effie was standing on that surface.

Several hundred people were standing beside her, staring at the approaching wave of Nightmare Creatures with horror and shock. All of them knew what was going to happen once they reached the Spire, but even then, the sight of it was terrifying.

She was at the center of the front row of these frightened people, supposedly in command of them. With her tall stature and lean, powerful figure, Effie stood out among the rest of the Sleepers. Her archaic armor glistened in the light of the rising sun, and on her shoulders, there was a flowing white cloak weaved from starlight.

She held Zenith in one hand and Dusk in the other.

Effie seemed like a bastion of strength and resolve in the sea of fear. A mythical hero that had stepped into the mortal realm from an ancient legend.

…But really, she was scared shitless.

Looking at the rolling horde of abominable horrors with a grim expression, the huntress lowered her head a little and summoned the helm of her armor, which was crowned with a tall crest of blue horsehair, and thought:

'Fuck me sideways… fuck, fuck, fuck!'

All around her, people were trembling. Some fool dropped his weapon and took a few steps back, as if considering running away. Even though she was currently seriously thinking of doing the same, Effie snarled and bellowed:

"Stand your ground, wretches! If anyone runs, I'll kill you myself!"

…What was the point of running, anyway? There was nowhere to run.

If they were going to die, they might as well die like humans.

Just like Princess had said. She was somewhat full of shit, but also never wrong.

"Get ready, bastards!"

Gripping her spear, Effie cast a sideways glance at the two men standing beside her. One of them was Caster, and the other one was Gemma. Who would have thought that one day she and the leader of Gunlaug's Hunters were going to fight side by side?

Weirdly, the presence of her past enemy was now extremely reassuring. However, even on his face, there were hints of fear.

The only person who could have stayed nonchalant in this situation was probably Doofus. That pale miscreant was either too crazy or too stupid… or both… to be scared of anything. But he was currently nowhere to be seen. Effie sort of missed the tiny menace.

But Sunny was probably either hiding someplace dark or doing something too insane to be entrusted to anyone else. In any case, she wished him luck.

She wished herself luck, too.

Looking at the approaching horde of monsters, Effie waited for a few seconds, and then screamed:

"First mark!"

Her shout was repeated by Seishan, who commanded the second line,

and reached Night somewhere in the third.

The plan of the battle was really simple. The first line had to hold off the monsters, changing places with the second once they grew tired. Meanwhile, the third was in charge of eviscerating as many creatures as they could.

But first, they had to withstand the initial charge. Nothing was more important than breaking the momentum of the attacking horde.

Somewhere behind her, the enchanting voice of their resident idol gave the command to fire the siege engines. These monstrous machines were constructed by the Artisans and were supposed to be able to pierce the armor of the most heavily protected Nightmare Creatures. As long as they were not Fallen, of course…

A strange and melodic sound reached her ears, and a fraction of a second later, six heavy metal spears, each at least two meters long, flew above their heads with incredible speed. They streaked through the air and collided with the front of the horde, sending bits of chitin and streams of blood to the ground.

She saw one of them behead a giant crab-like creature, the other pierce right through a bloodred mantis and skewer several monsters behind it. But the wave of horrors did not slow down one bit. There was just so many of them…

Feeling a shiver run through her body, Effie gritted her teeth, then shouted:

"Second mark!"

Almost immediately, a rain of arrows fell on the monsters, wounding many and killing a few. There were many other projectiles mixed in with the arrows. Some Sleepers used slings, crossbows, or more exotic projectile weapons. Some used their Aspect Abilities, which allowed them to create all sorts of sorcerous attacks, like flying blades made of wind, fire, and ice.

Some could even create bombs filled with soul essence, which detonated in the midst of advancing horrors and ripped many apart.

But still, no reaction. The monsters only seemed to become more frenzied, the fury, madness, and bloodlust in their eyes flashing even brighter.

The second rain of arrows fell, and shortly after, six more spear shot from makeshift ballistae crashed into the horde. By then, the Nightmare Creatures were already too close to the front line of humans to change anything.

Making a step forward, Effie strained her muscles and threw the Zenith Shard into the approaching mass of abominations. The beautiful bronze spear shattered the steel carapace of an especially tall creature and pierced its heart.

How could it not kill, empowered by the miraculous enchantment of the Crown of Dawn? All of their weapons, and all of their armors, were currently being fed raw power by Changing Star.

All around the steel demon, numerous abominations fell, killed in a similar fashion by the Memories thrown by the other Sleepers.

Summoning the spear back, Effie watched as the first row of Nightmare Creatures fell into a deep ditch that the Artisans created just an hour earlier. Those moving behind them simply stepped on the bodies of their fellow abominations and continued moving forward.

But finally, the speed of the horde was diminished, if only by a little.

'Damn thi…'

"Brace!"

That's all she had time to yell before the wave of monsters crashed into the line of humans.

Then, the world was consumed by nothing but madness, havoc, and death.

Chapter-317: Siege of the Crimson Spire (3)

Putting her weight behind the Dusk Shard, Effie leaned into the shield and gritted her teeth. A moment later, a monstrous blow landed on it, strong enough to crush stone into dust.

But unlike Sunny's marvelous Echo, she was not made out of stone.

Instead, Effie was made out of something far more resilient.

"Argh!"

Pushing with all her strength, she felt the shockwave of the impact run through her entire body and then dissipate into the ground. Her bones groaned, but held together. Despite the terrible pressure, she held, too.

A moment later, Effie growled and pushed even harder, throwing the carapace centurion that had crashed into her a couple of centimeters back. Simultaneously, her spear shot from behind the shield and pierced the black chitin, sinking deep into the flesh of the monster.

She twisted it and severed the creature's spine, then slammed her shoulder into the Dusk Shard, sending the massive corpse flying off the bronze blade.

Just in time. A second later, and the tall bastard would have skewered her with one of its scythes from above.

But as soon as the centurion fell to the ground, another abomination was already taking its place, with a terrible salivating maw and furious eyes that burned with madness.

'Curse it all…'

All around Effie, the bodies of humans and Nightmare Creatures were entangled into an undulating, bleeding, roaring mess. Claws and steel weapons rose and fell, sending streams of blood, splinters of bone, and chunks of flesh to the ground. Screams of fear, pain, and fury mixed with the indescribable howling of the nightmare horde into a cacophonous litany of death.

In this split second, she noticed one of her fellow hunters throwing the body of an iron spider that had jumped onto him back with a thunderous strike of his shield; a stone golem biting into someone's head with its terrible jagged fangs; a giant centipede wrapping its long segmented body around a screaming human and sinking its hundred legs into his melting armor.

Then, she had no more time to stare.

"Hold! Hold, you misbegotten waifs!"

Taking a step forward, she dodged a harrowing slash of a three-meter tall mantis-like creature's scythe and brought the edge of her shield on the leg of the abominable thing. The thin limb practically exploded, sending the monster crashing down — right on the blade of her spear, which flew upward and turned the head of the mantis into a red smudge.

Before the creature even fell to the ground, Effie had already spun, receiving a rain of blows on her heavy shield. Her spear lashed out from behind it, piercing the body of the attacker through the heart.

'Blood Flower…'

Effie held her breath and kicked the rotting primate in the chest, sending it flying back before too much of the damned pollen escaped the wound. The body of the Blood Flower host collided with another monster and exploded into bloody chunks from the force of the impact.

[You have slain…]

Noticing a shadow move to her right, Effie turned and thrust her spear forward. But at the last moment, she pulled it back. The point

of the bronze blade stopped just a few centimeters away from another human's face.

For a fraction of the second, they stared at each other — Effie with confusion, the vaguely familiar young man with belated fear. Then, a massive shadow moved behind him, and the youth's head suddenly separated from his shoulders in a stream of blood, cut off cleanly with one slash of a metal demon's blade.

'...D—damn!'

Effie looked up at the terrible creature. But before she had time to react, something crashed into her from the side, sending a wave of pain through her body. With a grunt, she slid on the bloodied coral and twisted her torso to put Dusk Shard between herself and the attacker.

A quick glance let Effie know that her armor was still intact, even if just barely. The point of impact was covered with seething acid, which was biting into the metal, trying to burn through it. Thanks to the enhancement of the Dawn Shard, however, the breastplate remained unscathed.

She shifted her weight, preparing to deflect the next attack of the giant centipede. Before Effie could, though, something heavy landed on her back, trying to sink its teeth into her neck. She felt drops of blood streaming to her chest.

A furious growl escaped from her mouth.

Hurling the Zenith Shard into the maw of the charging centipede and practically severing the body of the creature down its length, she stretched her freed hand back, caught the monster that was trying to bite her head off, and threw it to the ground.

The body of the abomination hit with enough force to make the coral crack. Just to make sure that the bastard was dead, she stomped on it with her foot, shattering the head of the damn thing into tiny pieces.

But as soon as she did, four more were already around her, their sharp claws and fangs lusting to taste her blood.

Bringing the Dusk Shard down on one of them, Effie grinned, then twisted and summoned her spear back.

With blood streaming from her wounded neck, she dodged a powerful claw and laughed:

"Bastards! Are you… trying to eat… me?! Ha-ha-ha… let's see who's gonna eat who, fools!"

All around her, the first line of the Dreamer Army was slowly buckling under the pressure of the nightmare horde. So many of them were already dead, and more were dying every second. Their bodies were torn to pieces and devoured, disappearing into the mass of monsters like morning dew. That sight was so harrowing and chilling that the mind simply refused to process it.

And yet, the Sleepers of the first line — those who possessed the most powerful combat Aspects and the best Memories — had achieved their goal. They stopped the devastating wave of abominations in its tracks and tied it down with their blades and their lives.

The horde failed to roll over the human army, obliterating it completely without even slowing down.

More than that, the massacre was not one-sided. For every human killed, several Nightmare Creatures were wounded, crushed, and cut to pieces. Arduously and at a great price, the first line was reforming itself, the survivors of the initial charge rallying around three champions.

They were Effie, Gemma, and Caster.

With each of them turning into a bastion in the sea of monsters and gathering fighters around them, the advance of the horde stalled. Whatever creatures managed to get past were met and eviscerated by the Sleepers of the second line, led by Seishan.

…And throughout all of that, the archers and the siege engines of the third line never stopped firing.

Chapter-318: Siege of the Crimson Spire (4)

"Stand your ground, wretches! If anyone runs, I'll kill you myself!"

Hearing Effie's voice, Kai flinched and forced himself to look away from the terrible visage of the horde of nightmarish abominations. Glancing down, he saw that his hand was shaking and clenched it into a fist. He had to calm himself, somehow, or his aim was going to suffer.

That wouldn't do.

…But honestly, how was a person supposed to not be terrified when a literal sea of Nightmare Creatures, each stronger and deadlier than anything anyone should ever be forced to face, was approaching them so fast?

Kai prided himself on overcoming things like stage fright and social anxiety, as well as getting through many unpalatable situations with grace and elegance, not to mention managing to survive in the Dark City for three long years without losing his humanity.

But this was just too much…

'...What would Sunny say?'

Thinking of his prickly, but adorable friend, Kai couldn't help but smile a little.

'Probably something like… oh, a horde of Nightmare Creatures? Yeah I've met one a few days ago. They all died when I sneezed, though.'

The strangest part was that he would be telling the truth. If Kai decided to dig deeper, he would discover something in the line of

Sunny's sneeze causing a massive avalanche that wiped all the monsters out.

…Or, more likely, that his sneeze had awakened some ancient, much more terrifying creature, which then proceeded to devour all the monsters before turning its gaze on Sunny himself.

That was just how Sunny was.

...Unpredictable.

Strangely, these thoughts succeeded in calming Kai down. He only regretted that the cute scoundrel wasn't close by to reassure him in person.

Gazing at the approaching horde, he sighed and gripped his bow tighter.

The coral was sloping down in the place where Changing Star had chosen to face the guardians of the Spire. Because of that, the position of the third line was higher than the other two, which would allow them to continue firing long after Effie and the rest had engaged the Nightmare Creatures in melee.

In theory.

All around him, those Sleepers that had suitable Memories or Aspect Abilities were preparing to shoot, waiting for his command. The surviving Artisans and their assistants were busy loading the six powerful ballistae they had transported all the way from the Dark City and put together the last night. The sight of the mighty siege engines made Kai sigh wistfully.

…Maybe they were going to survive this battle, after all.

"First mark!"

As soon as Effie's shout reached his ears, he turned to the Artisans and waved a hand, giving them the signal to fire.

A second later, six heavy spears flashed through the air and crashed into the wall of monsters. Many of them were eviscerated, but these

losses were like a drop of water in the sea of darkness.

Kai gritted his teeth.

"Second mark!"

"Now!"

As his melodic voice rolled over the third line of the Dreamer Army, he drew his bow and took aim.

Back in the real world, archery was Kai's favorite hobby. Not the practical skill of shooting a bow which was taught to many in school, but the ancient practice known as kyudo, which was more of a meditative ritual than a real battle art. Its orderly nature, tranquil philosophy, and repetitive motions appealed to something deep inside him.

The more stressed Kai was, the more he practiced.

Who knew that one day he would be relying on his marksmanship to survive?

Not that aiming at a literal horde of monsters was hard. He didn't have to worry about missing a shot with the Blood Arrow, at least.

Letting go of the string, Kai watched as the black arrow streaked through the air and bit deep into the body of a tall carapace demon. Its bone tip pierced the metal armor of the terrible creature with ease. Not only was it of the Ascended Rank itself, it was also enhanced by Lady Nephis.

Very few creatures could resist his attacks.

"Keep firing! Kill as many as you can!"

The demon swayed, then fell to the ground. Kai felt the weakness that overtook him every time he summoned the morbid Memory dissipate, and called upon the Blood Arrow again.

However, he didn't get to take his second shot before the wave of abominations crashed into the line of Sleepers.

For a second, Kai was stunned by the harrowing sight. The scale of the massacre that was happening below him was just too vast to comprehend. His heart was instantly constricted, full of worry for Effie…

And all the other people he knew.

With a desperate grimace contorting his face, Kai aimed and shot again.

And then he did so again, and again, and again.

Everyone around him was doing everything in their power to kill as many Nightmare Creatures as they could. Arrows, magical projectiles, and heavy lances launched by the ballistae rained on the ghastly horde, reaping countless lives.

But it was not enough, not nearly enough…

Seeing so many people be torn to pieces and devoured while trying to protect him and the other archers, Kai couldn't help but wish that he could do more.

'If only I could fly up and get a better shot… if only I could get closer!'

…But he couldn't.

While others lost themselves in the battle completely, Kai had to keep a cool head. After all, he was responsible for the third line of the Dreamer Army. The lives of all these young men and women depended on him.

That was why he kept his eyes on the merciless grey sky.

Just a few meters above them, almost invisible in the bright light of dawn, a vast net made out of sharp iron wire was drawn above the battlefield.

The wire for this net was collected in the Labyrinth, from those areas where iron spiders were known to nest, and fashioned into the aerial barrier by the Artisans.

It was meant to protect them from the terrifying creatures that could fall at any moment from the skies.

After all, the Crimson Spire did not only have a Terror and a horde of guardians.

It also had its Messengers…

Chapter-319: Siege of the Crimson Spire (5)

"Draw your bows! Take aim! Endure!"

Kai's words were meant to keep the morale of his troops more than they were meant to serve as actual instructions. To tell the truth, he did not have to do much, at least not yet. There were no such things as coordinated volleys when it came to archers — everyone just had to send one arrow after another into the seething mass of Nightmare Creatures, as fast as they could.

He had to do the same, too.

On the ground near him, several quivers full of arrows waited for their turn. Kai was shooting without a respite, alternating between using the Blood Arrow and these mundane ones. It took time for the ghastly Memory to return to his hands, so he had to use something else in-between.

A good archer had to be able to fire twelve times in a minute. An excellent one — twice that.

Gritting his teeth, Kai drew his bow, took aim, held his breath, and fired. Every movement had to be efficient, quick, and precise. As soon as one shot was done, another one immediately started. Draw, aim, release. Draw, aim, release. Repeat, and repeat, and repeat...

In these moments, he had become less of a human and more of a methodical battle machine that ran on all cylinders without stopping even for a moment.

He put an arrow in the eye of a terrible abomination that looked like a giant snake made of seaweed and rotting flesh. Another pierced the chest of a massive bestial primate and impaled him on the carapace

of a mantis-like creature. The third bit into the neck of the mantis and greedily drank its tainted blood, causing the monster to stumble and fall.

Kai felt like he was drowning.

Back in the waking world, archers were always portrayed as nimble, graceful warriors, someone who excelled in agility and speed as opposed to brute strength and physical might. They were beautiful maidens, elegant youths, and cunning rogues. Maybe that was why he had been attracted to bowmanship, to begin with.

The reality, however… couldn't be further from the truth.

It took a lot of strength to pull the string of a combat bow. The draw weight of a good bow was as much as fifty kilograms, on average. Twenty times the weight of a sword…

And Memory bows like his were much more monstrous. They were never meant for mundane humans, so pulling that string every few seconds burned through his stamina in mere minutes. Very soon, Kai's muscles screamed in pain, and his lungs seemed to be on fire.

But he couldn't stop… he had to keep shooting, no matter what.

"Keep at it! Draw, aim! Endure!"

How could he allow this insignificant pain, this unearned exhaustion to slow him down when out there, below, so many humans were dying in agony to keep the enemy away from the line of archers?

Letting loose another arrow, Kai drew in a hoarse breath and glanced up, almost out of habit.

However, this time, his gaze lingered on the indifferent grey skies. Then, his eyes widened.

At some point, five black dots appeared high above the battlefield, flying in an eerily perfect circle above it. A cold chill ran down Kai's back.

"Messengers…"

Five Fallen Monsters were observing the massacre that was happening below them with vile indifference. Even though he could not see their harrowing shapes too well, Kai could somehow feel their gaze.

'...Why aren't they attacking?'

As if to answer his question, a smaller dot appeared from the clouds and fell down through the circle created by the Messengers. And then, another. And another…

Just a second later, countless Nightmare Creatures poured from the grey skies and dove down, swiftly approaching the ground. There were so many of them that their mass resembles a swirling black column of a colossal tornado.

Kai trembled. His face paled.

…However, he did not allow fear to prevent him from fulfilling his duty.

"Skyward squads! Aim high!"

At this point, about half of the Sleepers in the third line were supposed to switch their attention and repel the aerial threat. However, engrossed in the battle that was happening below, most of them didn't hear or understand his words.

Kai grimaced.

And then, his clear, enchanting voice rolled over the entire battlefield once again, this time easily piercing through the clangor and havoc of the terrible strife:

"Skyward! Squads! Aim high!"

This was the voice he had used to sing the most difficult notes in front of hundreds of thousands of people. Only the dead could not hear it.

Brought back to reality by his voice, the archers quickly aimed at the sky.

…Just in time.

Kai let the Blood Arrow loose, then saw it fly upward and hit one of the winged abominations in the chest. The monster convulsed and dropped vertically down, hitting the sharp wires of the iron net with a sickening sound.

A tremor ran through the entire net, and drops of black blood fell to the ground.

Stretching his hand to grab a mundane arrow, Kai had a moment to take in the sight of the descending swarm. For a moment, his heart was squeezed by despair.

There were so many of the flying Nightmare Creatures that it was impossible to count them all. Among the swarm of horrors, there were the giant locusts he had fought before, massive abominations with hungry maws and bat-like wings, repulsive birds with fleshy tentacles growing from beneath their pale feathers, and many more. Horrors he had never seen and could have never imagined.

…And above them, five black dots continued to circle in the sky.

Putting the arrow on the string of his bow, Kai banished fear and doubt from his heart and drew it. Then, he aimed at the closest of the abominations and willed it to die.

A moment later, his arrow hit the creature right in the eye.

Most of the archers around him had already switched their targets. Only the siege engine crews and those with Abilities and Memories unsuitable for firing upward continued to pelt the nightmare horde with deadly projectiles.

The quickest of the descending monsters were eviscerated, and soon, a rain of corpses fell on the iron net.

…But a few lucky ones had avoided the arrows and dove down to devour the humans who stood on the ground.

Kai held his breath when the first of them hit the iron wires at full speed.

What if the net broke?

But it did not… at least for now. The Artisans had done their job well.

Instead, the creature was instantly sliced apart, its body disintegrating into a rain of blood and strangely symmetrical chunks of flesh. The sight of it was morbidly fascinating.

'...Thank gods.'

Reaching for another arrow, Kai found nothing but emptiness. Looking down in confusion, he saw that his quivers were empty.

'Have I… used so many?'

Before he had time to process that thought, however, someone had already thrown two fresh quivers on the ground in front of him.

Picking up an arrow with aching fingers, Kai inhaled through his teeth and raised his bow.

"Draw! Aim! Endure!"

Chapter-320: Siege of the Crimson Spire (6)

"Draw! Aim! Endure!"

Just as Night shouted these words, Aiko tripped and fell. The bundle of arrows she was carrying in her arms scattered on the ground.

"Ouch…"

Picking herself up from the coral, she hurriedly gathered the arrows and dashed to the nearest archer, then placed them near his feet.

In this battle, the role of people like her — those who were too weak to fight and did not possess a useful Aspect — was simultaneously the most simple and the most chaotic. They were charged with supplying the Sleepers participating in the battle with everything they needed, be it arrows, crossbow bolts, stones for their slings, or anything else.

There were several teams of runners doing different things. Initially, she was supposed to help carry the wounded from the first and second lines to the makeshift hospital at the back of the formation. There, a few people with Aspect Abilities having to do with healing waited, ready to help. Her friend Stev was one of them.

…But as it turned out, there wasn't a lot of wounded in this battle. Most simply died on the spot. So she was left with nothing to do and ended up here, helping to supply the archers.

She had just brought two quivers to Night, and was on her way…

…Wait, how crazy was that?

Trying to catch her breath, Aiko glanced around and shivered.

'Crazy, this is crazy…'

The scene in front of her was just too bizarre to be true. Several hundred Sleepers were besieged by a horde of Nightmare Creatures on the ground, with another falling on them from above. All that in front of an ugly, endless tower of crimson coral. Surely, she was dreaming…

'Of course you are! This is the Dream Realm, you dimwit!'

And yet, the weirdest thing of all... was that she was stuck in all this craziness with none other than Night from Nightingale, the breathtakingly beautiful idol whose posters hung on the walls of most girls her age back home.

Despite the fact that the two of them had known each other for more than a year and were even… uh… on friendly terms, this fact was the one that pushed the surrealism of the situation over the edge.

This was exactly the kind of weird dream a teenage girl like her would have.

Just as she thought about that, someone fell to the ground a few meters away from her. Turning her head to the sound of a muffled curse, Aiko saw Stev and another Sleeper carrying a crude stretcher. On it was a young woman, covered in blood and pale as a ghost, her leather armor torn apart and on the verge of dissipating.

A moment before, Stev's partner had tumbled down. It appeared as though he was wounded himself, albeit not too seriously. Running up to them, Aiko took over and helped the ample giant keep the stretcher even.

Carrying that weight with her tiny body was not easy, but she gritted her teeth and persevered.

Together, they hurried to the back of the formation.

On the way, they had to run past the desperate archers and the exhausted crews of the siege engines, who were slowly but surely running out of the massive lances to hurl at the rampaging horde.

From the look of it, things weren't going well for the Dreamer Army.

Down below, the first line was in the process of being completely eviscerated. Three islands of resistance still persisted in the sea of monsters, but Aiko didn't know how much longer those poor people would be able to hold. The second line was now entangled with the Nightmare Creatures, too.

The initial plan had been for these two forces to switch positions to give the exhausted warriors time to rest, but now, it was never going to happen.

Up above, more and more corpses were falling on the invisible iron net. Despite that, the number of the flying abominations did not seem to diminish at all. The metal wires were groaning, having to carry more and more weight.

'Are we all going to die?'

Feeling cold dread spread through her body, Aiko trembled and involuntarily turned her head to the tallest point in the Dreamer Army camp. There, on a protruding mound of crimson coral, she saw three figures.

One was Saint Nephis herself. The other was her blind oracle. And the third…

'Wait… what is that guy doing there?!'

The third person was none other than Sunny, the strange young man who had gotten her into this mess to begin with.

After joining the Changing Star's faction, Aiko had quickly learned who the important people were and what positions they held in the Bright Lady's cohort. Everyone's role was clear and easy to understand.

…Except for Sunny.

What role that pale youth played was entirely unclear. People seemed to consider him a member of Lady Nephis's cohort, but Sunny himself always insisted that he was not. He was thought to be a competent

fighter, but actually, no one had really seen him fight.

Most people just knew him for his tendency to keep to himself, ridiculous bragging, and carefree attitude. They simultaneously respected him for being Changing Star's scout and considered him mostly harmless.

However, Aiko did not think that Sunny was harmless. She had seen him appear from the shadows and kill the Guard who had been strangling her with one relaxed move, as though getting rid of an insect.

In her mind, Sunny was very mysterious. He was a wild card.

Seeing him with Lady Nephis now, she suddenly felt a tiny bit of hope.

Maybe Changing Star had a plan.

Maybe they were going to survive, after all…

"Aiko! Move your short legs faster, will you!"

Frowning at Stev's remark, she looked at the ground and concentrated on not slowing her giant friend down.

Soon, they reached the hospital and placed the stretcher on the makeshift table. Stev dashed to retrieve his tools…

But it was too late. The young girl on the stretcher was already dead.

Aiko remained motionless for a bit, staring at the ground. After a while, Stev cautiously touched her on the shoulder.

"Hey… are you okay, shorty?"

She wiped her face, then nodded.

"Yeah. I'm fine. Gotta run, though. Those… those arrows aren't going to carry themselves."

Stev lingered for a bit, then tried to smile.

"Alright. Uh... stay safe."

She smiled and nodded again.

"Yeah. You stay safe, too."

With that, Aiko turned around and ran out of the tent.

Outside, the battle was only growing more ferocious.

Chapter-321: Siege of the Crimson Spire (7)

Sunny stood at the peak of a tall coral mound, observing the battle that raged below. There was a slight frown on his face, but his eyes were calm.

The Dreamer Army was besieged from two sides. One horde of abominations was slowly devouring its front line, while another had descended on them from above, stalled for now by the vast net of sharp iron wires.

…It was like a scene from a fever nightmare.

Every second, humans were dying, torn apart by the claws and fangs of the harrowing horde of monsters. Their cries and screams fused with the roaring wails of the Nightmare Creatures into a deafening wave of dissonant noise. That wave washed over the crimson coral, sending a chill running down his spine.

Turning away from the bloodsoaked visage of the battlefield, Sunny glanced at Nephis.

Changing Star was sitting on the ground. Her face was calm, and her eyes were closed. On her forehead, the gem of the Dawn Shard burned with furious white light, feeding hundreds upon hundreds of Memories with raw power. She appeared to be in the depths of profound meditation, seemingly not affected by the horrible decimation that was happening below them at all.

Cassie was standing beside her, looking at the ground. Her hand rested on the hilt of the Quiet Dancer. The other two Echoes of the blind girl had been with the first line of the army during the initial charge; by now, they were already destroyed.

Sunny wanted to say something, but then thought better of it. The time for conversations was over.

Instead, he faced the Crimson Spire. His gaze lingered on it for a few moments, then slid back to the terrible sight of the slaughter. Straining his eyes, Sunny tried to distinguish the figures of Effie and Kai in the chaotic formation of the Dreamer Army.

'Don't die just yet, fools…'

***

Down below, surrounded by those warriors of the first line that still stubbornly clung to life, Effie had long forgotten about anything else but bloodshed and strife. The scope of the world had narrowed to the suffocating confines of the furious battle, consuming both the past and the future.

The was only the present, and the present consisted of nothing but violence and death.

…And killing, of course.

With a mad grin on her bloodied face, she faced one abomination after another, crushing, breaking, and tearing them apart. Her tall, lean body had turned into a lethal battle machine, moving with ferocious speed and devastating power, deadly precision and murderous will.

Both Zenith and Dusk behaved like natural extensions of her limbs, alternating between attack and defense to reap one profane life after another.

Her armor had been pierced several times, but she paid it no attention. It didn't matter. All that mattered was to kill as many Nightmare Creatures as possible, to obliterate as many of the hateful monsters as she could. Their corpses piled up, carpeting the crimson coral with an uninterrupted bleeding mass of broken flesh. After a while, Effie had to start watching her step carefully.

Despite that, the number of abominations showed no sign of growing smaller. It was as though the horde was endless and boundless. But

she wasn't scared…

In fact, Effie was enjoying herself.

Oh, this was so exhilarating!

Dodging a serrated claw, she lunged forward and crushed the ribcage of an attacking monster with the rim of her shield, then used the remaining momentum to skewer another one on her spear.

With no time to retrieve her weapon and turn, she used the shaft of Zenith Shard to deflect a blow from a mighty pincer of a carapace scavenger and kicked the beast viciously, shattering the adamantine shell of its armor.

Other Sleepers were fighting around her, using the fearsome huntress as an anchor in the sea of death. They were still holding, still breathing. Two other islands of resistance had formed around Gemma and Caster, who were also in the throes of the battle trance.

The proud Legacy had turned into a whirlwind of ghostly steel, eviscerating any creature that dared to approach him. His movements were so fast that his enemies' blood could not even fall to the ground. As the result, Caster was constantly surrounded by a cloud of red mist.

The experienced Hunter fought with cunning and skill, sending one abomination after another into the embrace of death. Whatever wounds appeared on Gemma's body were soon gone, not even leaving a trace. Numerous fearsome creatures had been slain by his hand, unable to do the tall man any harm.

…And yet, humans were dying. One after another, they fell, leaving less and less warriors to hold back the gluttonous horde.

As Effie fought, a sudden thought entered her mind, sending a slight shiver running through her body.

'...Heavy. That damn shield is so heavy…'

She was growing tired.

***

Kai had lost count of the number of monsters he killed. Because of the constant cycle of losing blood and magically getting it back, he felt slightly lightheaded. Luckily, he had yet to miss a shot… maybe?… and was able to continue firing.

More and more corpses fell on the iron net, their blood flowing on the people below. It was as though they were now fighting in the rain. A red, fetid rain of blood…

Blood, blood, blood. No matter where he looked, he saw nothing but blood.

He was sick of it.

Gritting his teeth, Kai drew his bow once again, aimed between two dead creatures above him, and sent an arrow flying.

[You have slain an awakened…]

They were running out of arrows.

The siege engines were running out of lances, too.

And the damn Messengers were still circling high above, not even trying to descend.

'Why, why aren't they attacking?!'

Looking down, Kai tried to catch his breath and muttered:

"Curses…"

Why was it so dark? He couldn't see where his quivers were.

Something shifted in his mind, and then he blinked.

Looking up again, Kai realized that the entire net was now covered with corpses. There were so many dead Nightmare Creatures that they formed a macabre carpet that veiled the battlefield from the sun.

There wasn't a lot of daylight seeping through the net now, and it

was growing darker and darker with each second.

His eyes widened.

Not because of the deep darkness, but because Kai suddenly heard the iron wires groaning under all that weight. Almost as if strained too much and on the verge of tearing apart.

The protective net was going to break soon.

His face paled.

'Oh no!'

***

On the tall mound of crimson coral, Changing Star suddenly opened her eyes and looked at Sunny.

"It's time."

Chapter-322: Siege of the Crimson Spire (8)

Things were turning from dire to desperate for the Dreamer Army. The first line was almost gone, and the second was now completely engulfed by the horde of Nightmare Creatures. Seishan was still standing her ground, but just barely.

The archers under Kai's command were doing their best to eviscerate as many monsters as they could, but with their attention split between those on the ground and those diving at the iron net from above, the results weren't as devastating as they had been during the initial stage of the battle.

They were running out of arrows and ammunition, too. The siege engines were slowly disintegrating under the pressure of so many consecutive shots. The people were tired.

…And the iron net itself looked as though it was going to break soon. It was covered with a carpet of dead Nightmare Creatures, submerging the battlefield into dim twilight. With every minute, that twilight was turning darker and darker.

The human formation seemed to be balancing on the very edge of collapse.

It was at that moment that Nephis, who had been calmly meditating through all of that, suddenly opened her eyes.

In them, two blinding white flames were burning. Her pale face became illuminated by this radiance, like that of a merciless celestial creature.

Turning to Sunny, she remained silent for a moment, and then said:

"It's time."

He sighed.

Indeed, it was time for the two of them to enter the fray and play their roles.

As Neph stood up and summoned her sword, he flexed his shoulders and stretched his neck. The Midnight Shard, however, remained hidden in the depths of the Shadow Core.

Sunny glanced at Cassie, hesitated for a few seconds, and then smiled.

"Hey, Cas. I'll… see you on the other side, I guess."

She lingered for a bit, then nodded slowly and turned away.

'...Don't die.'

He sighed.

"That's my cue, I guess."

Together, he and Nephis walked over to the edge of the coral mound and jumped down, leaving the blind girl standing alone on its top.

Softly landing on the ground, Sunny waved to Neph and said in an even tone:

"I'll go first. Good luck."

With that, he turned in the direction of the battlefield and inhaled deeply.

In front of him, the desperately fighting Dreamer Army was intertwined with the nightmare horde in the darkness cast by the groaning net of iron wires.

The whole battlefield had turned into a realm of blood, death… and shadows. The more corpses piled on the net, the deeper and darker the shadows became.

This was Sunny's territory now.

Stepping into the darkness, he suddenly became almost invisible. The shadows embraced him as one of their own, hiding his figure and movements. Veiled in their embrace, he steeled his will and dashed toward the battlefield.

Moving forward, Sunny ran past the tent of the makeshift hospital where a group of people was supposed to be desperately trying to save those lucky few who had managed to receive a non-lethal wound.

Right now, however, the tent was partially toppled and engulfed in chaos. One of the flying Nightmare Creatures had somehow managed to squeeze under the net and was now wreaking havoc inside of it, its black body pierced by several arrows, but still full of deadly power.

Sunny moved past it without looking back.

Stepping through the deepest, darkest shadows, he ran past the line of siege engines and noticed the small figure of Aiko helping an exhausted Artisan load one last spear into position. The steel lance was clearly too heavy for the delicate girl, but she was pushing it up with stubborn determination.

Then, he was between the rows of archers. These people were continuing to fire, desperately trying to find clear spots between the numerous corpses piled on top of the trembling iron net. He saw Kai looking around with a lost look on his face.

Sunny wanted to stop and reassure his friend, but couldn't.

Sliding between these people without being noticed, he left the third line and dashed toward the second.

Here, his task of remaining unseen became much harder.

The second line had lost almost all pretense of order, but remained unbroken. With the warriors under Effie's command still taking on the brunt of the horde and withstanding its pressure, Seishan had managed to prevent any abominations from reaching the archers.

…At least for now.

Dodging the defending humans and the attacking monsters, Sunny entered the crucible of battle. He wasn't here to fight, however. His goal was still ahead.

Moving unseen, he evaded several vicious skirmishes. Somewhere along the way, he noticed Seishan herself.

The beautiful woman was fighting with darkly fascinating grace. The Sunlight Shard rose and fell, guided by her slender hand. The amount of power delivered by each strike, however, was nothing short of terrifying.

Every time the war hammer struck, a Nightmare Creature was broken apart, with bits of chitin, bone, and streams of blood flying into the air.

It was still not enough, though. After another blow, a menacing figure of a carapace scavenger suddenly grasped the Memory in its powerful pincer and tore it away from Seishan's hand. In the next moment, a subtle change happened to the body of the graceful Handmaiden.

It seemed as though she grew taller, her limbs elongating, her spine twisting. Her smooth grey skin became like that of a shark, and her eyes rolled back, revealing a second pair of pupils, these ones vertical and surrounded by a sea of red.

Seishan's jaw unhinged, revealing several rows of terrible fangs. Dashing forward, she easily broke the carapace of the Nightmare Creature with her bare fist. A fraction of a second later, her jaws closed on the joint of the pincer, piercing the chitin, and tore the entire limb apart.

It was hard to tell who was the real monster between the two.

...Leaving that disturbing scene behind, Sunny moved into another layer of shadows and ran toward the first line.

There, the mass of abominations and surviving humans was almost impenetrable. And yet, he had to pierce it.

Drawing in a deep breath, Sunny dove into the sea of Nightmare Creatures.

Moving between the endless horde of monsters like a nimble dancer, he dodged and avoided their chaotically moving bodies, keeping to the shadows. If he was noticed, he was going to be torn apart in mere seconds. If he slowed down, he was going to be crushed and obliterated.

Like a shadow, Sunny slid between them. A few times, he had to quickly dash beneath an especially tall abomination or jump over a smaller one. For a few seconds, he even ran on top of these horrible monsters, jumping from the shoulder of one to the carapace of another, and then back to the bloodied, slippery ground.

On his way, he saw Effie. The huntress had either lost or dismissed her shield, and was now spinning her spear and using it to deliver both piercing and slashing attacks, drawing wide arks in the air with its bronze blade. Her body was covered in blood and her armor was broken and shattered.

But on her face, there was a wide, joyful grin.

Leaving it all behind, Sunny moved deeper into the horde of monsters. A few times, he thought that he would be noticed. But in the end, the shadows had kept him safe.

And after a while… an eternity, maybe… he finally broke free of the endless mass of Nightmare Creatures.

Now, there was nothing in front of him but the wide expanse of the cursed black water.

…And the mass of the Crimson Spire stretching endlessly into the skies.

Chapter-323: Siege of the Crimson Spire (9)

Sunny froze for a moment, captivated by the all-encompassing expanse of the cyclopean spire that towered above the entire world.

Almost at the same moment, the darkness behind him was suddenly annihilated by a blinding explosion of light. The noise of the battle changed, somehow growing even more intense. The howling of the nightmare horde grew louder, but also became slightly muffled, almost… anxious.

Changing Star had finally joined the fight.

A moment later, hundreds of human voices rose in a deafening battle cry, their spirit lifted, their crumbling resolve restored. With Nephis arriving on the battlefield, the balance of the whole battle shifted. The Nightmare Creatures surged to destroy the radiant figure, only to be obliterated by it.

They almost seem to melt under the furious assault of the incandescent blade, turning into cinder and ash.

Neph's arrival brought a moment of relief to the exhausted warriors of the Dreamer Army. Instead of using it to catch their breaths and regroup, however, they chose to use this opportunity to launch into a ferocious attack, making the horde shudder and recoil.

…Sunny was not paying any attention to what was happening behind his back, though. His eyes were locked on the bridge of crimson coral that stretched across the vast whirlpool of black water, creating a path to the island on which the cursed Spire stood.

On it were countless abominations, each of them pushing, howling, fighting for their turn to taste soft human flesh.

However, the harrowing mass of them wasn't endless anymore. He could actually see the tail of the nightmare horde, with the distant half of the bridge being almost empty.

Not that it was going to make things easy for him. As soon as Sunny escaped from beneath the iron net, he became illuminated by the bright sunlight, with nowhere else to hide. Completely exposed.

The eyes of numerous monsters were already on him, bloodlust and hunger igniting in their depths. If he wanted to use the bridge, he was going to have to cut his way through the undulating mass of Nightmare Creatures.

'Saint.'

Answering his call, the marble demon appeared from the shadows, her ruby eyes burning with cold menace behind the visor of the onyx helmet. The taciturn knight stood silently on the shore of the rushing black water, gazing at the horde of monsters across its dark expanse.

Sunny took a few steps back and glanced at the mass of abominations who were already lunging in his direction.

'Here goes nothing…'

Dashing forward, he crossed the distance to the Saint… and jumped.

The Shadow raised her shield, allowing him to step on it, and then pushed away with all her incredible strength. Simultaneously, Sunny launched himself off this unlikely springboard and shot into the air.

The wind whistled in his ears.

Soaring above the mass of black water, and all the horrors that hid in its depths, he flew toward the Crimson Spire with terrible speed. The Dark Wing turned into a blur behind his back, making Sunny weightless, and thus prolonging this state of flight.

It was still not nearly enough to reach the island, however.

In a few short seconds, he crossed almost half of the wide surface of the dark whirlpool. But then, his momentum slowed, and soon,

Sunny started to fall. Thanks to the transparent cloak, he didn't plunge straight down, instead gliding through the air, slowly approaching the seething black water.

He was never going to make it.

…But then, he was never planning to.

Twisting his body, Sunny hurled the Prowling Thorn at the crimson coral of the bridge. As soon as the heavy kunai bit into it, he forcefully pulled on the invisible string, changing the direction of his flight.

A few seconds later, Sunny landed on the bridge in a roll and jumped to his feet. Behind him, the tail end of the nightmare horde was still oblivious to his presence.

In front of him was a clear path to the Crimson Spire.

Dismissing the Dark Wing and summoning Shadow Saint back into his core, Sunny ran forward without wasting even a moment to look back.

***

Soon, the Crimson Spire eclipsed the whole sky. It seemed as though the world suddenly made a ninety-degree turn, the ground itself becoming vertical instead of horizontal. Even craning his neck, Sunny couldn't see the top of the ominous tower anymore.

It was as if the Dream Realm was like a box, and he had reached one of its walls. The edge of reality itself.

Throwing all unnecessary thoughts out of his head, Sunny rushed toward the Spire. His goal was almost in sight.

'Seven severed heads… guarding seven locks…'

This was what Cassie had told them a year ago, at the start of this cursed journey. Somewhere at the base of the Crimson Spire, there was a place where one could insert seven keys into seven locks to seal the curse of the all-consuming darkness underground once more, thus

restoring the oath of the ancient heroes.

Shard Memories had given Changing Star's cohort these keys, and now, Sunny held all of them in his soul.

He just had to find the locks…

And very soon, he did.

Hidden behind a tall mound of crimson coral, a vast expanse of flat surface led all the way to the walls of the corrupted Spire. On it, arranged in a wide semi-circle, seven giant heads stared away from Sunny.

Despite the fact that they were facing the other way, he recognized them immediately.

These were the stolen heads of the seven colossal statues that stood across the desolate hell of the Forgotten Shore, ones that had been torn off their shoulders by the Crimson Terror thousands of years ago and then brought here, to lay at the base of its citadel for all eternity.

The Lord, the Priestess, the Knight, the Hunter, the Builder, the Slayer, and the Stranger.

Their gazes were aimed at the gargantuan gates of the Spire.

And there, on those gates, the image of seven shining stars was engraved into the ancient stone.

Each star had a dark keyhole in its radiant center.

Chapter-324: Siege of the Crimson Spire (10)

Summoning Saint to stand side by side with him once again, Sunny glanced at the gates of the Spire, grimaced, and jumped down from the mound of coral.

'I don't like this at all…'

Out there on the island, it was quiet. Too quiet.

Even though all the Nightmare Creatures were now behind him, slowly devouring the Dreamer Army, the open space pierced by the gazes of the severed heads of stone colossus was too ominous and foreboding to not spell trouble.

But Sunny was done being afraid a long time ago.

'You fear me, instead.'

Walking forward, he passed between the giant heads and entered the empty space in front of the cyclopean gates. Feeling as though someone was staring at his back, Sunny shivered and approached the seven locks.

Halfway to the gates, he stopped, hesitated for a moment and then looked back, at stone heads.

This was the first time he saw the faces of the seven heroes.

The face of the Lord was noble and dignified, the face of the Priestess — beautiful and gentle. The Slayer was arrogant and cold, her lips twisted in a crooked grin. The Stranger wore a helmet, darkness nesting in the crack of its visor.

'...People. They were just people.'

Turning away, Sunny sighed, then shook his head in dejection.

'I won't judge you for what you have done. But I hope… I really hope that we will be able to do better.'

With that, he took another step forward… and froze.

Something had changed on the stretch of land between him and the gates of the Crimson Spire. A cold wind suddenly howled, throwing bits of coral into the air.

Those pieces did not fall down. Instead, more and more of the crimson shards flew up, slowly forming into seven twisted silhouettes.

Sunny cursed and outstretched his hand, summoning the Midnight Shard into it.

A few seconds later, seven golems of crimson coral stood in front of him and Saint, blocking the path to the star sigil. He recognized their shapes.

The armored figure of the Knight. The slender figure of the Slayer. The graceful figure of the Priestess…

Vile, corrupted facsimiles of the seven heroes slowly moved, raising their weapons to point at him. Their movements were crude and inhuman, but radiated a sense of terrible, profane power. Despite their outward appearance, he felt that these creatures were desecrating the memory of the ancient heroes instead of manifesting it.

Sunny grinned and walked toward the coral golems, the blade of his sword pointed downward.

"Seven of you? Do you really think this will be enough to stop me?"

His dark eyes gleamed, turning cold and ruthless.

"...Well then, fools, come and get me!"

With that, he dashed forward and raised the Midnight Shard.

Before Sunny could strike, however, the Stranger appeared in front of him as though out of nowhere and put his round shield in the path of the austere tachi. Hitting it felt like hitting a mountain.

Sunny's eyes widened.

'Fast…'

A fraction of a second later, he noticed a beak of a war hammer flying toward his temple with terrible speed. Gritting his teeth, Sunny shifted and blocked it with the blade of the Midnight Shard.

As a painful shockwave rolled through his body, he was thrown backward and slid on the red coral, then groaned and spat a mouthful of blood.

'Damn it! How are they so strong?!'

Looking up, he saw seven tall figures approaching him with steady, inevitable malice. Each of the golems was powerful enough to rip an entire cohort of Sleepers to pieces.

To his side, Saint raised her shield and hit its rim twice with the blade of her sword.

'Whatever. Let's do this!'

***

Back across the whirlpool of black water, the Dreamer Army was still furiously resisting the horde of Nightmare Creatures. By now, all of the monsters had left the coral bridge and descended upon the Sleepers, consumed by the mad desire for human flesh.

There was no distinction between the first and the second line now. All those still alive were engulfed by the bloody chaos of the slaughter, desperately trying to survive in the midst of absolute chaos.

Changing Star was at the center of the terrible bloodshed, shining

like a radiant sun. She fought alone, because no one else could survive the devastating pressure that the horde exerted in the zealous attempts to extinguish that light. Any human that tried to approach and help her was immediately torn to pieces.

Indifferent to everything, Nephis moved like a furious deity, eviscerating one abomination after another. All around her, burning corpses littered the ground, their cursed blood boiling and evaporating into the air. Not only was her presence relieving the pressure from the rest of the Sleepers, but they also found strength in it.

As long as Changing Star fought for their salvation, how could they give up? As long as her light was there to banish the darkness, how could they lose hope?

That was why no monster had managed to break through the remnants of the first two lines and reach the archers.

Standing on the slippery surface of the crimson coral, Kai gazed at the terrible scene of the massacre below him, and then raised his face to the sky.

Instead of the sky, however, he saw the dark mass of bleeding corpses carpeting the iron net. His face paled, light disappearing from his eyes.

As the last officer of the Dreamer Army to not be engaged in the melee, he was the only one who could see the bigger picture.

He was the only one who knew that the iron net was mere minutes away from breaking.

When it did, the mass of sharp iron wires and all the crushing weight of countless dead monsters was going to fall on the remains of the human formation, spelling their doom.

Someone had to do something…

And that someone was him.

Kai blinked, then closed his eyes for a moment.

'Of course. I am the only one who can.'

Nothing could stop the collapse of the iron net. But the manner in which it collapsed could be controlled. All they had to do was to cut it at a suitable spot, allowing for the mass of dead Nightmare Creatures to fall down without burying the fighting humans beneath it.

And who could cut the iron wires beside a person capable of flying?

The only problem was that once the net was cut… nothing was going to stop the five Spire Messengers from entering through the breach.

He was going to have to lead them away from the battlefield, too.

'...Yes. Yes, this is what I have to do.'

Dismissing his heavy bow, Kai stared at the ground for a few moments. An elegant falcata slowly appeared in his hand.

And then, with an expression of dark resolve appearing on his face, he pushed himself off the crimson coral and flew to the strained iron net.

Chapter-325: Siege of the Crimson Spire (11)

"Argh! Damn it!"

Effie stumbled back and swiped the Zenith Shard in a wide arc, cutting through the bodies of several Nightmare Creatures. With her other hand, she took hold of the oversized translucent tick that bit deep into her thigh and tore it away, losing a chunk of flesh in the process. Before the repulsive creature had time to sever her fingers with its sharp mandibles, she crushed it in her fist.

Feeling hot blood streaming down her leg, she grimaced and unceremoniously wiped the pulverized remains of the tick on the fabric of the Sunlight Shard, then spun to follow the trajectory of her spear.

Effie was tired. So, so tired. She was utterly exhausted.

…But there was no end to the nightmarish horde.

'Can't you all just die, bastards…'

Catching the shaft of the Zenith Shard with both hands once again, she thrust it back and skewered another abomination with its sauroter, then tore the sharp spike away and dashed to the side. A moment later, a terrifying scythe of a carapace centurion sunk into the spot where she had just been.

Effie spun the spear and lashed out with it, piercing the chest of the massive creature and killing it on the spot.

As the heavy body fell to the ground and sent tremors through it, she had a second to draw in a pained, raspy breath. Her wounded leg almost buckled.

'Why is no one covering my back…'

Effie looked around to check on the fellow Sleepers who had been fighting by her side, but failed to see anyone.

All around her, there was nothing but the endless mass of Nightmare Creatures.

Everyone was already dead.

…Except for her.

"Ha. Ha-ha. Ha!"

Effie was left alone in the sea of monsters, separated from the remnants of the Dreamer Army by an impenetrable wall of claws and chitin. She only knew that someone was still alive and fighting back there because of the radiant white light that continued to illuminate the vast expanse of the battlefield… of this tomb that they had built for themselves from iron wires and dead Nightmare Creatures.

Not that the light could reach where she stood. Here, there was nothing but darkness.

She didn't have much hope of reaching it, too.

Effie looked at the ground and smiled bitterly.

Then, she raised her head high and stared at the approaching tide of monsters, her eyes sparkling with dark amusement.

"Come then, beasts. Oh, what a feast this will be…"

***

Sunny barely avoided the blade of the coral sword and deflected it to the side with the Midnight Shard. Then, he tried to counterattack, but was forced to jump back with a muffled curse. A sharp stiletto flew past his face, leaving a shallow cut on his cheek.

'Damned abominations!'

Currently, he was facing against three golems at the same time. The Knight, The Slayer, and the Priestess were trying to surround him. They moved with terrifying speed and possessed enough power to obliterate a Sleeper with laughable ease.

Luckily, Sunny was not just any Sleeper. The shadow was wrapped around his body, making him faster and stronger. With its help, he was barely able to hold on and remain alive.

…For now.

Some distance away from him, Saint was facing off against the Stranger, the Builder, and the Hunter. Those three seemed to be even more ferocious than his own opponents, so the Shadow was having a lot of trouble, too.

'That doesn't make any sense…'

Sunny was not surprised that these constructs were far more powerful than him. But Saint was an awakened demon, and one of the most dangerous Nightmare Creatures of her Rank he had ever seen, no less. And yet, she was barely able to remain in one piece.

Good thing that the Lord had yet to join the fight. The seventh golem stood motionlessly some distance away, as though uninterested in the fight.

Because of how fast his enemies were and their numerical advantage, Sunny had to summon the Moonlight Shard as well. Now, he was holding the tachi in one hand and the stiletto in the other. This wasn't what he was used to and made his offense weaker, but allowed him to bolster his defense.

This was one of the reasons why Sunny was still alive.

Suddenly, a blast of light hammered into his eyes, making him stagger and blinding him for a few short moments. In the next second, the Priestess lunged at him. She wielded no weapons, but her coral hands were deadly enough to serve as a pair of them.

Trusting the Shadow Sense, Sunny dodged and brought the Midnight Shard down, hoping to catch the golem. His second hand moved,

blocking a strike of the Slayer. Just as before, the impact almost shattered the bones in his wrist and sent Sunny reeling.

He had successfully resisted the attack and bought himself enough time to regain his vision, only to be faced with the furious threat of another assault, this one coming from the Knight.

Saint wasn't having any more luck. Her shield had been caught by the beak of the Builder's war hammer and pulled down, which gave the Hunter an opportunity to thrust his spear into the breach in her defense. At the same time, the Stranger was preparing to attack her from behind.

'This can't go on much longer… think, think!'

Sunny felt as though he was missing some crucial fact about this arduous, lethal fight. He had to solve it before the last golem joined in…

Twisting his body to deflect the incoming strike, he frowned.

…Why had the Lord not attacked?

There was something about it…

Suddenly, Sunny's eyes narrowed.

'Can it be?'

The golems were created in the image of the ancient heroes, and even wielded the same weapons. He had managed to resist his attackers for so long partially because he was intimately acquainted with their armaments.

After all, he held the Midnight and Moonlight Shard in his hands.

If their weapons were the same as his Shard Memories, just made out of crimson coral… was it the same for the Lord?

Did the Crimson Terror create its own equivalent of the Crown of Dawn, and was it currently feeding the seven golems with power?

The Lord was standing alone, seemingly indifferent to the battle that was happening in front of him.

…Just like Nephis sat away from the battlefield at the start of the siege, the gem of the Dawn Shard burning brightly on her forehead.

If the seventh golem was doing to the other six what Changing Star had been doing for the Dreamer Army… then, Sunny still had a chance.

Chapter-326: Siege of the Crimson Spire (12)

Glancing at the graceful figure of Saint, Sunny gritted his teeth and made a difficult decision.

He had no choice but to do it. Too much depended on his success.

A moment later, he feinted an attack and jumped back at the last moment, disengaging from the three menacing coral golems instead. At the same time, he sent the Shadow a mental command.

The taciturn demon froze for a fraction of a second, as though hesitating. But in the end, she did not.

Abandoning the measured cadence of her flawless technique, Saint allowed the spear of the Hunter to strike her in the chest. The force of that vicious attack was so immense that her onyx armor shattered, allowing the tip of the spear to bite deep into her stonelike flesh. Soon, a stream of ruby dust flowed out of the wound, painting the broken cuirass red.

But the Shadow did not pay it any attention. Catching the shaft of the spear with her shield hand, she twisted her torso and flung the towering coral golem away.

And then, she suddenly dashed to the side.

Before the terrible creatures could understand what was happening, she closed the distance and descended upon the three abominations attacking Sunny. Even though her attack was swift and unexpected, they managed to react to it at the last moment. The obsidian steel of her dark sword was met by weapons made of crimson coral.

It gave Sunny the second he needed to get past them, nevertheless.

Dodging the hand of the Priestess, he appeared behind the three golems and ran toward the distant figure of the Lord.

Behind him, Saint challenged all six of the golems, tying them down with a ferocious onslaught of attacks. She paid dearly to buy him time, however. Just a second later, another attack got past her defense, leaving a deep crack on the black armor. And then another, and another…

Ruby dust flowed down like blood.

With a terrible grimace contorting his pale face, Sunny rushed to reach the seventh of the Star Sigil guardians.

***

Kai approached the dark mass of broken flesh and groaning iron wires, feeling cold drops of blood fall on his face. Changing the angle of his flight to move parallel to the ground, he clenched his teeth and lashed out with his sword.

The heavy blade of the falcata collided with the iron wires and easily sliced them apart. This net was created from the same thin metal as the webs of iron spiders. As such, it couldn't resist the sharpness of his weapon Memory, which was elevated almost to the Ascended Rank by the miraculous Crown of Dawn.

His hand, however, wasn't as strong. Even with his core brimming with soul essence, Kai was still just a Sleeper. As soon as he struck the net, a sharp pain pierced his wrist.

He screamed, but did not let the sword fall from his hand.

'Almost…'

As a long cut appeared on the net, many corpses fell down through the breach. Kai had chosen the target for his attack carefully, making sure that the rain of dead Nightmare Creatures would fall on the empty stretch of crimson coral between the largely intact line of archers and the remnants of the vanguard, which was embroiled in horrifying melee.

But this was not enough. The number of dropping corpses was too small to relieve the pressure from the crumbling net.

Dashing through the air, Kai made a turn and flew back. A few moments later, he delivered another strike. A second cut appeared on the net, crisscrossing the first one.

With a strange and melodic noise, four triangular sections of the net collapsed, creating a wide funnel through which a flood of bleeding carcasses fell. Even more slowly rolled in the newly formed depression, finally allowing sunlight back onto the battlefield.

And through that breach, he saw the sky once again.

Most of the flying Nightmare Creatures had been slain by the archers, with just a few still trying fruitlessly to break through the net. But high above them, five dark dots still circled in the clouds.

As soon as Kai saw them, a cold shiver ran through his body.

Because it felt as though they saw him, too.

A moment later, the Messengers broke the perfect symmetry of their circle and plunged down.

'No!'

Kai's eyes widened.

Dashing through the breach, he dismissed his Aspect Ability and allowed inertia to pull him down. A moment later, he landed on the carpet of dead monsters and desperately looked for arrows sticking from the bodies.

Tearing one, two, three… five of them from the flesh of the Nightmare Creatures, he simultaneously summoned his bow. He would have gathered more, but there was no more time.

As soon as his bow weaved itself from sparks of light, Kai pushed himself off the carpet of carcasses and shot upward. Then, he looked up.

The five terrifying Spire Messengers were descending upon him, wind whistling through their gruesome black feathers. Hunger and madness were burning in their eyes.

For some reason, it felt as though the heavens themselves were falling on him.

Flying toward the Fallen Monsters, Kai desperately drew his bow and sent an arrow in their direction… then two, three, four, and finally five.

At that point, the Messengers were close enough to see every detail of their repulsive pale bodies.

The arrows Kai shot were mundane ones, and thus unable to do much damage to these harrowing abominations.

…Unless aimed perfectly by a master of the bow.

All five struck the base of one of the Messenger's wings, damaging it enough to send the vile creature crashing down, out of control.

Kai dodged to the side, missing the second one by just a few meters.

The third one was now right above him, its beak opening in a gluttonous glee.

That was when Kai made his sixth shot. Only this time, the arrow he sent flying was not mundane at all.

It was the Blood Arrow.

The hideous black Memory streaked through the air and hit the Messenger right in the eye, sinking in so deep that only its fletching remained seen. The terrible monster suddenly convulsed, and then fell down.

The melodious voice of the Spell sang into Kai's ear:

[You have slain a Fallen Monster, Cursed…]

But he had no time to listen to it.

Using the body of the creature he had just killed as a shield, Kai evaded the attack of the fourth Messenger.

But the last one…

The last one suddenly appeared right in front of him, leaving Kai no path to retreat, no hope of saving himself.

It was too late.

The terrifying black beak shot forward.

***

Effie did her best. She really, really did.

But in the end, there was only so much that a person could endure.

After an eternity of refusing to give up, covered in terrible wounds, she made a mistake. It wasn't a mistake, even.

Just the inevitable failure of a body put through too much pain.

After delivering another lethal blow, she tried to dodge an attacking monster, but at the most crucial moment, her mauled leg suddenly buckled.

With a short yell, Effie stumbled and fell to the ground.

The creature didn't give her a chance to stand up again. It jumped atop the huntress, pressing her into the ground. All she had time to do was grab the jaws of the monster to prevent them from closing on her head.

Effie wanted to throw the heavy abomination off her, but a moment later, another jumped on it, its mandibles biting into her shoulder. And then another, and another, and another.

Soon, she was buried under a crushing pile of frenzied Nightmare Creatures, sharp teeth sinking into her flesh.

'Hurts… it hurts so much…'

Effie gritted her teeth, remembering…

What it was like, to see that distant, pure light.

Chapter-327: Siege of the Crimson Spire (13)

At the last moment, the coral golem moved, disappearing from Sunny's view. A fraction of a second later, it materialized a few steps away, just outside of the Midnight Shard's reach.

'...Bastard!'

It was too late to change the direction of his attack. Pulled forward and down by the inertia, Sunny was forced to finish his downward slash and stumbled, falling to one knee. He found himself in a dangerous position, wide open for an attack and with little ability to maneuver.

The perverse simulacrum of the Lord towered above him, his powerful frame radiating a sense of harrowing strength. On the forehead of the artificial creature, a polished piece of coral shined with intense crimson light.

That light seemed to sap the life from everything it fell upon.

Feeling a sudden weakness permeate his body, Sunny gritted his teeth and dashed to the side. A split second later, the fist of the Lord pierced the air with a cracking sound and shattered the ground, sending a rain of debris flying in every direction.

Twisting his body, Sunny spun and delivered a backhanded blow before his feet even touched the ground. The blade of the tachi scraped against the vambrace of the golem's armor, leaving a deep gash in it.

However, it didn't do a lot of damage.

Landing and sliding back on the coral, Sunny thrust his hand forward

and sent the Moonlight Shard flying at the golem's face. The creature easily swatted it away with its hand.

By the time it did, however, Sunny was already near, delivering a high thrust with the Midnight Shard. As soon as the Lord moved to deflect the austere blade, he changed the direction of his attack and turned it into a vicious horizontal cut.

Using every last bit of his finesse and prowess, Sunny brought down a rain of strikes on the golem. He was moving with astonishing speed and agility, his attacks and steps seamlessly flowing from one into another. It was as though the whole onslaught was just one fluid, continuous motion.

But no matter how swift and skilled he was, it all turned out to be useless.

The Lord was much faster, stronger, and more powerful. Even though he was temporarily forced to concentrate on nothing but defense, every second that passed spelled doom for Sunny.

Because somewhere behind him, Saint was being slowly destroyed by the six other golems. And as soon as she fell, he was going to die.

"Curse you!"

Pausing for a mere moment, Sunny gave the coral abomination a chance to attack. Its fist shot toward his chest with terrifying speed.

Turning his torso, Sunny avoided the blow and caught the hand of the golem between his body and his arm. This position didn't give him any advantage, because the creature was much stronger than him.

On the contrary, it immobilized one of his hands and forced him to let go of the hilt of the Midnight Sword with the other.

…But it gave Sunny purchase.

The Lord raised his second fist, ready to crush the human's skull with one deadly strike.

***

High in the skies above the battlefield, Kai was just moments away from death. He had wounded one of the Messengers, killed another, and avoided two more.

But the last one was now upon him, and there was no escape.

Time seemed to slow down. With his eyes opened wide in terror, he stared at the swiftly approaching beak of the harrowing creature. No matter how fast Kai was, he knew that this time, he wouldn't be able to evade his end.

If only he had one more second! A fraction of a second, even…

Fully aware that it was hopeless, Kai changed the direction of his flight. Despite it all, he had to at least try.

But it was hopeless.

Until…

At the last moment, something flashed through the air and collided with the black beak of the Messenger, throwing it slightly off course. That gave Kai the fraction of a second he was praying for.

Twisting his body, he allowed the beak to pass mere centimeters away from it, crashed into the side of the Messenger and bounced off of it, then stumbled away through the clouds.

A slender, graceful rapier suddenly appeared by his side and then circled around him, cutting a stray black locust in half. With its pommel facing Kai and its tip aimed at anyone who would dare to attack him, the Quiet Dancer glided through the air, forming a defensive sphere of sharp steel around the young man.

Despite its inanimate nature, the flying rapier somehow managed to convey the feeling of mean, arrogant, and bad-tempered protectiveness.

Staring at the elegant Echo, Kai couldn't help but smile.

'Thank you, Cassie…'

***

On the bloodsoaked battlefield, a small hill of monsters was moving and shifting, every horrifying creature in it lusting to taste the flesh of the person buried beneath.

It seemed as though there was no hope.

But what was hope? Hope was something that Effie had abandoned long ago.

She didn't need it.

All she needed was a roof over her head, delicious food on her plate, and the thrill of the hunt. The indescribable pleasure of being healthy, strong, and living.

With a tiny bit of misguided pride mixed in to spice things up.

She wasn't willing to die yet, not like this, not without giving it one last fight...

Suddenly, a muffled sound resounded from under the hill of monsters. It was a furious growl, full of rage, defiance, and a desperate will to survive. A moment later, the hill shuddered.

And then exploded, bodies of Nightmare Creatures flying away and rolling on the ground.

Straining her muscles to the point where it felt like they were about to explode, and then past that, Effie pushed the incredible weight away with her mighty shoulders and emerged from the seething mass of abominations.

She was still holding the jaws of the first creature to jump on her with her bleeding hands. With a ruthless motion, she tore them apart and threw the broken body aside. Her fist flashed through the air, crushing someone's skull.

Effie had lost the Zenith Shard somewhere, but it didn't matter

anymore. With a bestial growl, she spun and fought, killing one monster after another with her bare hands.

She was not going to surrender. She was not going to back down. She was not going to...

After a while, no one was there to attack her anymore. Effie didn't know why.

To be honest, by then, she couldn't see much. Her vision was blurry, and slowly growing dark.

Met with the lack of resistance, she staggered and fell to her knees. She tried to draw in a breath, but something was blocking her throat, and something was wrong with her lungs. She couldn't.

'This... is... the end, I guess...'

Through the blurry dark fog, Effie suddenly saw a radiant figure approach.

She smiled.

'Is that you, Princess? Ah, I hate to admit it… but I… don't… think... I can...'

It was getting hard to form thoughts. Effie sighed, then closed her eyes, ready to give in to the comfort of oblivion.

But then, two cool hands softly touched her face, and purifying white flames rolled through her body, bringing the pain and the agony away.

***

Sunny was entangled with the Lord, the abomination's hand trapped between his arm and his body. The golem didn't seem to care about it that much, however. Instead, it raised his other fist and prepared to deliver the final blow.

Before he had the chance to do so, however, Sunny's empty hand shot forward.

Grabbing the shining piece of crimson coral with his fingers, he strained for a fraction of a second.

And then tore it from the creature's forehead.

The polished gem came out of the coral flesh of the terrible creature, dragging countless red threads with it. Sunny pulled as hard as he could and then twisted his hand, forcing the red strings to snap.

Something cracked inside the menacing Lord's body, and he suddenly staggered.

Without wasting this opportunity, Sunny released the golem's hand, raised the Midnight Shard high above his head, and then delivered a devastating downward slash.

The blade of the tachi collided with the crimson coral and shattered it, turning the towering figure of the Lord into a rain of crumbling shards.

Chapter-328: Siege of the Crimson Spire (14)

Left on the top of the tall mound of crimson coral, Cassie stood alone in the darkness.

Now that the Quiet Dancer had left her side, she was back to her previous self.

Lost.

Weak.

Frightened.

Utterly helpless.

The oppressive nothingness surrounded her from all sides.

But that nothingness was full of sound.

It swelled with the deafening cacophony of the nightmare horde's onslaught. Cassie heard howls, growling, inhuman screams, shrieks, and the scraping of chitin.

She heard the clangor of steel and the sound of flesh being ripped apart.

She also heard countless human voices calling out to any kind of deity that could save them. Full of fury, agony, bravery, fear, resolve, sorrow, strength, helplessness, hope, faith, despair, disbelief.

She heard them dying.

Standing above it all, Cassie shivered. She wanted to press her hands against her ears, but didn't.

…Her terrible vision was coming true.

And she was back to being lost in the darkness.

Just like before. Worse than before. Almost like on that first day in this cursed, forsaken, lightless land.

In this forgotten hell.

Back then, she had found herself stranded on a similar mound of coral. Only what surrounded her was the dark sea and not a horde of Nightmare Creatures.

But Cassie didn't know that. She didn't know where she was, and what was hiding in the boundless darkness. She only knew that she was alone, and helpless.

That she was going to die in that lonesome, cold nothingness.

She had given up. Sitting down on the hard coral, she hugged her knees and tried not to cry. Abandoned and forgotten, she waited for death.

But instead of death, a cold and indifferent voice came out of the darkness:

"...What are you doing?"

That was how she met Nephis, who saved and protected her ever since. Without even asking anything in return, not before, and not after learning of what Cassie's Aspect was able to do.

Just because she wanted to.

Nephis brought her out of the darkness and destroyed the bitter, all-encompassing prison of her loneliness. How was Cassie supposed to ever repay that debt?

And then, she met Sunny. Sweet Sunny, who pretended to be callous and cruel, but was actually caring and kind.

And then, she had to make a choice.

…And now, she had to live with that choice.

Or die with it...

As Cassie stood, listening to the sounds of slaughter, a sudden gust of wind rustled her beautiful blond hair.

She flinched, and slowly turned to face the wind.

A moment later, her face paled, and her lips moved slightly.

'No!'

Left alone, away from the battle and anyone who could have heard her, Cassie closed her eyes and whispered into the nothingness:

"A storm… there is a storm…"

***

The Dreamer Army became much smaller, but still held on. In fact, it was slowly pushing the horde of the Nightmare Creatures back.

As the line of archers ran out of arrows and ammunition, those who had no suitable Memories to replace them summoned their melee weapons and joined the vanguard, reinforcing its dwindling numbers. The Artisans had done the same, abandoning their siege engines and throwing themselves into the crucible of combat.

The nightmare horde, meanwhile, had depleted its seemingly endless reserve of fresh bodies. With no more abominations crossing the bridges of crimson coral and lunging forward to join the massacre, its mass was slowly growing thinner.

With Changing Star serving as the unassailable core of the human formation and rallying fighters around her, with Effie stalling the entire horde to give the rest of the humans time to mend the breaches in their defense lines, for a few minutes, the flow of the battle froze in fragile balance.

The two opposing forces seemed to finally be evenly matched.

All it would have taken for the humans to turn that balance in their favor was one last furious push.

"Come on! Hold strong!"

"Light yourself on fire!"

"Follow the Immortal Flame!"

As several people yelled, feeling that the fate of this battle was about to be decided, a gust of wind suddenly blew over the battlefield, bringing with it the smell of salt.

The light dimmed slightly.

Looking west, they suddenly stumbled and froze for a few moments. Their faces became as white as snow.

…Behind the Crimson Spire, an impenetrable wall of darkness was slowly devouring the world. It was approaching the battlefield with terrifying speed, numerous bolts of lightning illuminating its furious depths.

A storm was coming.

As it drew closer and closer, the surface of the black water that swirled around the island of the cyclopean tower suddenly trembled.

And then, it began to crawl upward.

First slowly, and then faster and faster, the black whirlpool swelled and moved forward, swallowing the crimson coral meter after a meter, its dark vastness rising and seething.

The cursed sea was coming to devour the Forgotten Shore.

The monsters that guarded the Crimson Spire, however, did not react in the same way as the usual Nightmare Creatures would have.

Instead of scurrying away to find shelter, they howled and shrieked in eerie triumph, and then crashed into the Dreamer Army with renewed fury.

Expressions of terror and despair appeared on people's faces. But there was nowhere to retreat, nowhere to run.

All they could do was stand and fight.

Even when the ground beneath their feet became slippery and slick, covered by a thin film of black water.

Even when the water continued rising.

***

[You have slain an awakened…]

[Your shadow…]

[You have received a…]

Spinning as soon as the remains of the Lord crumbled to the ground, Sunny dashed toward the remaining six golems to reinforce the heavily damaged Saint.

He didn't listen to the Spell, picking up only one piece of information from her words: the coral golems were of the Awakened rank.

…Made sense.

Just as a Fallen Tyrant was not supposed to be able to create minions of the same Rank, a Fallen Terror was most likely not capable of such feat either.

Previously, the coral constructs were fast and powerful enough to make Sunny think that they were Fallen creatures. But it was just the effect of the profane gem burning in the Lord's forehead.

Just like the Dawn Shard was able to elevate Awakened Memories to the boundary of the Ascended rank, so had the Lord enhanced his fellow abominations, bringing their power close to that of the Fallen.

But now that he was destroyed, the augmentation disappeared with him.

Sunny was confident in his ability to finish off six awakened Nightmare Creatures… for the most part.

As he ran, a strong gust of wind suddenly hit him in the back, almost making Sunny stumble.

'What the hell…'

Throwing a glance over his shoulders, he stared at the skies, his eyes widening.

An endless wall of darkness crashed into the Crimson Spire and swallowed it, painting the whole world black.

Stunned, Sunny gritted his teeth and turned away from it, a cold feeling of dread permeating his entire body.

'...Curse it all!'

Chapter-329: Siege of the Crimson Spire (15)

In front of him, Saint was barely holding on to life. Her armor was broken and painted red by the crimson dust that flowed from a dozen terrible wounds. The visor of the helmet was shattered, together with the side of her face. One of her ruby eyes was missing, replaced by a jagged black hole.

As he ran, a vicious blow of the Knight's sword got past the Shadow's defense and bit into her shield arm, severing it at the elbow.

Saint staggered and awkwardly lashed out with her sword. Then, she took a step back and fell heavily to one knee.

The menacing figures of the golems towered above her, approaching to deliver the final blow. The war hammer of the Builder rose, ready to fall down like a herald of destruction. The spear of the Hunter flew forward like a hungry predator.

The Shadow slightly tilted her head and faced her death. Her eerily beautiful alabaster face was calm and indifferent. The weapons of the profane constructs reflected in her one remaining eye, growing larger and larger as they drew closer.

…But in the end, all they managed to pierce was emptiness.

The wounded Saint dissipated into shadows, summoned back into the nurturing black flames of Sunny's core at the last second.

In the next moment, a wall of darkness swallowed the empty space in front of the Crimson Spire, bringing with it pelting rain and hurricane winds.

The storm was now upon them.

The six golems lingered for a few seconds, staring into the raging expanse of the terrifying tempest. They were submerged into its darkness, with only a rare flash of lightning illuminating the world. The wall of rain was so thick that it was almost impossible to see anything through it.

Suddenly, they discerned a hint of a movement to their left and swiftly turned, ready to attack the enemy. However, there was no one there.

A moment later, though, one of them suddenly shuddered, and then crumbled to the ground, its head flying off into the darkness. The flash of the blade that had decapitated it was so swift and unexpected that none of them had time to react.

It also came from the wrong direction.

The golems spun and raised their weapons… but instead of an enemy, all they saw was a heavy kunai appearing from the wall of darkness and hitting one of them in the neck.

The blow was powerful enough to make the golem stagger, but not that dangerous. The wounded abomination simply raised its hand and tore the dagger out of its coral flesh.

As it did, however, the figure of the Slayer that stood behind the rest of the golems suddenly fell to her knees. A moment later, her head slowly slid from her neck and tumbled down, revealing a perfect, smooth cut.

Sunny, who hid in the darkness, bared his teeth in a vicious grin.

'This is my domain, wretches. You are my guests now…'

Two dead, four to go.

Realizing that their enemy was capable of hiding in the shadows and seeing in the dark, the golems changed their tactic. The Knight, the Stranger, and the Hunter shifted to stand in a circle, protecting the Priestess with their bodies.

The Priestess, meanwhile, raised her hands to the skies.

In the next moment, a blinding light shot into every direction from her open palms, revealing Sunny, who had been just a few meters away from them and preparing to launch another attack.

'...Damnation.'

***

On the bloody battlefield, the remains of the Dreamer Army were besieged from all sides. They continued to fight with doomed determination, abandoning all fear and doubt. Even though the black water was already high enough to reach their knees, the humans continued to resist the horde of the frenzied Nightmare Creatures, slaying three for every one of them killed by the terrifying abominations.

Illuminated by the radiant light of Changing Star, not one of them tried to run.

Instead, they stalwartly stood their ground and fought. Some were smiling, and some were even singing.

…As more and more of them fell, forever disappearing under the cold surface of the cursed sea, the black water kept rising.

***

High in the skies above the battlefield, Kai and the Quiet Dancer were flying through the nets of lightning, dodging the attacks of three relentless Spire Messengers. The terrible monsters were infinitely faster and more powerful than the two of them, but had to rely on their wings to propel their massive bodies through the air.

Both Kai and his graceful defender flew thanks to magical abilities, and as such, could maneuver better than the winged abominations. This was the only reason why they were still alive.

As Kai dodged and evaded the onslaught of deadly attacks, he pelted the Messengers with precise shots of his bow. However, none were as lucky as his first one: the black arrow bit into the flesh of the powerful monsters again and again, drinking their blood, but all that achieved was slowing them down a bit.

But he didn't care. He never hoped to defeat the harrowing heralds of the Spire, to begin with. He just wanted to keep them away from the people fighting on the ground…

For as long as he could.

Flying through the storm, struggling against the crushing pressure of the wind and dodging bolts of lightning, Kai gritted his teeth and kept doing just that.

***

…Not pausing even for a second after his position was revealed, Sunny lunged forward and delivered a swift thrust, aiming at the closest golem — the Knight. The creature moved, deflecting the blade of the Midnight Shard with a coral parody of the noble weapon.

Now that the Lord was destroyed, the artificial creatures became considerably less fast and strong. They were no better than carapace scavengers, or maybe centurions…

Barely more powerful than Sunny himself, thanks to the shadow.

However, they were just monsters, while he was something much more deadly.

A kid from the outskirts who spent a whole year fighting for his life in the depths of hell.

He had the skill, the clarity, and the murderous will of a human.

Allowing the Midnight Shard to slide along the blade of his enemy's sword, Sunny made a step forward and raised his hands. The tachi changed its angle and then easily moved past the Knight's defenses, piercing his neck. One twist, and it flew out of the golem's flesh, disintegrating half of his neck in the process.

Continuing the motion, Sunny slammed his fist and the hilt of the Midnight Shard into the golem's face with enough force to break the remaining half.

[You have slain…]

Using the grounded footwork that he had learned in the countless spars with the Shadow Saint, he quickly repositioned himself and blocked the attack of the Hunter's spear. The Stranger was still trying to move past the Priestess to join the fight — Sunny had planned to use this to his advantage from the start.

Before his current opponent could react, Sunny delivered a deadly counterattack, cutting off one of his arms. A moment later, he pulled the tachi back, thrust it forward, piercing the Hunter through the chest, and then pulled it up, cutting the cursed creature apart.

[You have slain an awakened…]

The Priestess lunged forward, wishing to rip him apart with her bare hands, but was suddenly pulled back by the invisible string that had wrapped itself around her neck at some point in the fight.

That was all the time Sunny required.

As pieces of coral fell to the ground, the Spell spoke once again:

[You have…]

With the Priestess dead, the Stranger was left in the darkness once again. He hesitated and raised his shield, looking at the spot where the enemy had been just a second ago and listening to the sound of water through the roaring storm.

However, in the next second, something rustled behind him. The Stranger spun and delivered a wide horizontal slash with his sword, but then paused, staring down.

His sword hand was gone, cut cleanly at the wrist.

Then, something flashed through the rain and streaked across his body. The golem staggered, and then fell down, crumbling into halves as it fell.

Breathing heavily, Sunny lowered the Midnight Shard and looked at the six piles of crimson coral that were disappearing beneath the black water in front of him. Then, he spat.

"Who told you that you can hurt my Shadow, bastards?"

Turning around, he saw a bolt of lightning hit the gargantuan gates of the Crimson Spire. Arcs of electricity danced on its stone surface and then dissipated, leaving a ghostly afterglow in their wake.

Only the shapes of the seven stars continued to shine, as though full of energy.

Clutching his burning chest, Sunny looked at the black water that was already up to his knees and headed toward the Spire.

Chapter-330: Siege of the Crimson Spire (16)

As the Dreamer Army was drowning in the rising waters of the cursed sea and the insatiable tide of monsters, Sunny approached the crimson tower.

Far away from the rest of them, completely alone, submerged in roaring darkness, he struggled against the seething mass of black waves and the hurricane winds to cross the last few meters that separated him from the shining star sigil engraved into its gates.

Finally, his hand touched the cold surface of the ancient stone. Wiping the rainwater off his pale face, Sunny stared at the radiant shapes of the seven stars.

'This better work…'

Summoning the first of the Oath Keys, he lingered for a moment, and then carefully inserted it into the black chasm of the keyhole.

***

Separated from him by the vast expanse of the swelling sea of darkness, the surviving Sleepers desperately fought the advancing horde of monsters. The black water had already reached their waists, making it hard to move. The army was trying to retreat up the slope of the crimson coral, but the pursuing sea was much faster than them.

Changing Star was still slaying one monster after another, her radiance only growing brighter in the tenebrous hell of the furious storm. Raindrops were evaporating as they touched her brilliant skin, its incandescence making even arcing bolts of lightning seem pale and bleak.

…Suddenly, an almost imperceptible ripple ran across the surface of the black water. A gust of cold wind blew over the Forgotten Shore, sending a shiver running through the hearts of countless creatures.

***

Moving on to the next star, Sunny summoned the second key and put it into the lock. Nothing terrible happened, so he struggled through the water to reach the third one.

'Terrible… what would that even look like? What can be more terrible than my current situation?'

As if to answer his question, somewhere behind him, a black tentacle suddenly rose out of the seething waves and blindly whipped through the air. Crashing into a mound of coral, it easily shattered it. A rain of debris fell into the water.

Just a moment later, countless others followed the first one.

Noticing this new development through the eyes of his shadow, Sunny cursed.

'Me and my big damn mouth!'

Luckily, the tentacles were some distance away, somewhere near the remains of the seven golems he had slain. But as the sea rose, they started slowly moving in his direction.

Hurriedly inserting the third key, Sunny dashed to the fourth star. Another Oath Key slid into its lock.

The water was now even higher, forcing him to struggle against its weight. A strong gust of wind hit Sunny in the back, almost causing him to crash headfirst into the stone gates.

As he put the fifth key into the keyhole, the tentacles were already alarmingly close.

'Curse it all!'

Sunny inserted the sixth Oath Key into the lock and dove into the

black water, swimming toward the last one.

Just a few moments before the mass of twisting tentacles descended on him, he found the last shining star and drove the seventh key into its center.

Suddenly, the world shuddered.

***

The whole Forgotten Shore trembled.

Out on the battlefield, the surviving humans froze for a second, startled by the sudden change that rippled through the world.

The furious onslaught of the wind died down. The torrential flood of rain stopped. The continuous, deafening roar of the thunderstrikes grew quiet.

The terrible storm seemed to have ended as suddenly as it had appeared, dissipating into nothingness like a fragile mirage.

Even the Nightmare Creatures attacking them stumbled and paused for a moment, staring at the sky.

…And then, the dark veil of clouds was broken by a blindingly bright ray of sunlight.

As soon as it happened, the restless black water stopped rising, and then flowed in reverse.

The cursed sea was retreating.

***

"Crap!"

As soon as Sunny put the last Oath Key into the seventh lock, the whole Crimson Spire shuddered. An indescribable sound came from its depths, echoing through the darkness of the storm like a heavy, mournful sigh.

And then, the gargantuan gates opened. The giant slabs of ancient stone moved for the first time in thousands of years…

…The problem was, the gates opened outward, slamming into Sunny and dragging him through the mass of black water with terrible speed. The unexpected blow threw him off his feet and almost caused him to drown. Not to mention the fact that it hurt like hell.

The opening gate brought him away from the damned tentacles, at least.

After a while, Sunny was thrown onto the slope of a tall coral mound. Coughing a few times, he tiredly crawled a few meters up, then fell on the rough surface of the coral and turned around.

What Sunny saw made him blink, then open his eyes wide and stare in disbelief.

The dark sea was being sucked into the Spire.

The black water was flowing in reverse, rushing into the enormous doorway. The twisting tentacles and the harrowing creature they belonged to were carried away by that current, disappearing into that blackness, too.

The strange thing was, the amount of water entering the Crimson Spire was much larger than what should have been possible. Sunny expected to see it fill the cyclopean tower, but instead, it simply flowed inside and seemed to… disappear.

As if swallowed by the Spire and banished into the depths of the earth.

Just a few moments later, the level of the dark sea began to fall.

The storm died down, and the impenetrable veil of clouds was torn apart, allowing sunlight to illuminate the world once again.

And in a few minutes…

The cursed sea was no more.

Sunny stared at the clear surface of the crimson coral, which had been covered by the black waves not too long ago.

The bottomless dark ocean was gone without a trace. Even the black whirlpool that had surrounded the island was not there anymore, revealing a deep, uneven, empty semblance of a moat.

Then, Sunny stared at the sky, where a furious white sun was hovering right above the tip of the Crimson Spire.

A stunned thought entered his mind…

'Did we… did we do it?'

...Did he actually destroy the dark sea?

Chapter-331: Siege of the Crimson Spire (17)

The dark sea was gone.

And all the horrors that dwelt in its cursed depths were gone with it, too.

The world was bathed in pure sunlight. The surface of the Labyrinth suddenly became vibrant and bright, with stark shadows hiding under the jagged pillars of the crimson coral. The furious white sun burned above the Crimson Spire, as if frozen in the middle of the sky.

Sunny even had to cover his eyes for a few seconds.

Laying on the ground, he allowed himself a few moments of rest. A short laugh escaped from his lips.

'I actually did it?'

Speak about the unlikely events...

Unfortunately, he couldn't really rest yet.

The battle wasn't over. The horde of Nightmare Creatures was not defeated yet.

…And somewhere in the Spire, the Crimson Terror itself was not defeated, either.

With a deep sigh, Sunny collected himself and rose to his feet. They were almost there. They almost escaped. Now, all that was left was to make one final push. Even if it was going to be the hardest one yet...

Looking at the tall mound of coral towering above him, he squinted against the light and began climbing it.

Was it always so bright?

As Sunny climbed, he summoned the runes and glanced at them.

Shadows: [Marble Saint].

'Thank gods.'

He knew that Saint was alright, but still wanted to check. The taciturn demon had been heavily damaged and was bound to spend a long time restoring herself, however, her existence was not in danger.

Then, his eyes slid lower:

Shadow Fragments: [999/1000].

'...Crap.'

Sunny gritted his teeth. He was simultaneously excited and scared to find out what was going to happen once he saturated the Shadow Core. It was bound to be beneficial, but at what cost?

Would he go into a slumber for several weeks, as Saint had? Or suddenly become incapacitated amidst furious combat, as Nephis had been after defeating Gunlaug?

That could cost him his life…

'Not like I can do anything about it now.'

Full of unease, he continued his climb and soon reached the very top of the coral pillar. Standing on it, Sunny looked in the direction of the Dreamer Army.

Something wet suddenly fell on his hand. Looking down, he saw a drop of blood rolling off his skin. A moment later, another fell on the vambrace of the Puppeteer's Shroud.

Surprised, Sunny raised his hand and swiped it across his upper lip. It came away wet with blood.

'...A nose bleed? What the hell?'

Come to think of it, why did he feel so weak?

As Sunny stared at his hand in confusion, a violent ripple suddenly ran through his shadow.

***

Across the deep moat that surrounded the island, the remnants of the Dreamer Army were at the precipice of turning the tide of battle in their favor.

Just a few minutes ago, they had been drowning in the rising flood of black water and the relentless onslaught of the horde, lost in the fury of a cataclysmic storm. But now, things were different.

The storm was no more, and the dark sea had retreated. The sun shined brightly in the sky, drowning the battlefield in its light. Bathed in it, the Nightmare Creatures seemed to become hesitant… almost sluggish.

They were not giving up, however. The monsters continued to attack the humans in a frenzied rage, their claws and fangs reaping one life after another. But the survivors of the Dreamer Army were repaying every loss tenfold.

Reinvigorated by the exhilarating gift of sudden salvation, they steeled their hearts and fought with zeal, fervor, and murderous will. More and more Nightmare Creatures fell to their blades, and the horde did not seem to be endless anymore.

The Sleepers did not know why the storm had dissipated and why the cursed sea had retreated, but their faith in Changing Star now burned even brighter. She had promised to guide them out of this hell, and somehow, even the black water had capitulated to her radiant light…

The victory was not impossible anymore. They could practically taste it…

But Nephis herself suddenly stumbled and slowed her sword dance. A confused, alarmed frown appeared on her face. Dodging the claws of an attacking abomination, she thrust her sword into its maw, then jumped back.

Free of the swarming monsters for a few short moments, she lowered her sword.

And looked at the sky.

***

High above her, Kai was still alive… somehow.

'What is happening?'

He had spent so long flying at a terrible speed, struggling against the crushing wind, dodging bolts of lightning and the cursed Spire Messengers, pushing the limits of both his body and mind… the exhaustion was catching up with him now, making it hard to think.

Let alone react…

He really, really didn't feel well. His whole body ached, and his vision was slowly turning blurry. A sickening feeling of weakness permeated his body.

The storm had come out of nowhere, and then disappeared without a trace. The skies were blindingly bright.

…That was a relief.

But the damn abominations were still there.

At least they didn't look tireless anymore.

In fact, the Messengers seemed to be in as much of a sorry state as Kai himself. He wanted to flatter himself and assume that it was because of his arrows. He had wounded the damned monsters many times, after all…

But no, it didn't make any sense.

They seemed able to resist the effect of the Blood Arrow before, at least to a large extent, so why would it change now?

'Something is wrong…'

Using the sun to blind his enemies, Kai dove into the light and dashed to the side, narrowly avoiding the claws of one of the Messengers. Or so he thought — in reality, it wasn't narrow at all. He dodged it with a lot of room to spare. The Quiet Dancer didn't even need to get involved.

'Are they… growing slower?'

With a sudden feeling of unease, Kai hesitated for a split second, and then reduced his speed to take a good look at the terrifying creature.

What he saw made him scowl.

The Messenger looked… wrong.

Its glassy black eyes were erratic and senseless. They were seeping with blood, which flowed down the black feathers like a crimson stream. There were two other similar streams, coming from the monster's ears. The muscles of his pale body were spasming, rolling under the white skin like panicking worms.

As Kai watched, the Messenger suddenly opened its beak in a silent scream. A moment later, a flood of blood erupted out of it and dispersed in the wind like red mist.

Then, the creature convulsed one last time and lost control of its wings. Not even trying to correct itself, the terrible abomination plunged down.

Kai flinched and opened his eyes wide in terror.

…The Spire Messenger was dead.

Chapter-332: Siege of the Crimson Spire (18)

Sunny swayed a little, and then looked down at his shadow.

The shadow seemed to be in pain. It was slumped, clutching at its chest with one hand and waving at him with the other. When it noticed that Sunny was staring at it, it desperately pointed to itself.

'What… what is this guy trying to say?'

Was he having a heart attack? No, of course not. That would be ridiculous. Shadows didn't have hearts…

What was it pointing at, then?

Sunny scowled.

The shadow was his reflection. So maybe it was not pointing at its own heart, but at his.

But his heart felt fine. What else was there to point at?

Suddenly, his eyes widened.

The Soul Core. The Soul Core usually overlapped over a human's heart…

With a shudder, Sunny dove into the Soul Sea.

Instead of the usual peace and quiet, he was met by ominous chaos. The dark waters that were always tranquil and still were now restless and turbulent. They rippled and surged, as though under the assault of the invisible winds.

Up above, the spheres of light that represented his Memories

shimmered and blinked, as if about to be extinguished. The black sun of the Shadow Core was trembling. He could almost see tiny cracks appear on its transparent surface.

Only the silent shadows were still the same, not disturbed by the approaching disaster at all. They stood motionlessly, staring at him with no expression on their black, lifeless faces.

Sunny did not pay them any attention and stared at the Shadow Core with wide eyes, dumbfounded.

'...Soul damage. I am receiving soul damage.'

He was under the effect of a continuous soul attack.

Escaping the unquiet sea in panic, Sunny wiped the blood off his face and looked around with a grim expression. He was even paler than usual.

'What the hell is attacking me?'

After a few moments, he suddenly shivered, stunned by a chilling revelation. And then looked up, at the blinding discus of the sun.

…He had not been wrong. Its light was indeed much brighter than it had been before.

The skies of the Forgotten Shore, which had always been grey, were now almost white, full of merciless heat and radiance. It looked as though someone had erased reality itself, leaving behind nothing but an endless white void. With each second, it was growing more and more incandescent.

'The sun…'

The source of the soul attack was not a Nightmare Creature.

It was sunlight itself.

Anywhere it reached, the souls of living creatures were being slowly eroded and destroyed. And since the sun was now directly above them, at high noon, there was almost nowhere where it couldn't

reach.

There was no escape from it.

Except for…

Turning around, Sunny stared at the opened gates of the Crimson Spire. Behind them, welcoming darkness promised shade and safety. This was the only place where he could hide from the annihilating sun.

'The army!'

Spinning around, he peered across the moat.

Out there on the battlefield, the Nightmare Creatures had stopped their endless onslaught. Now, they were stumbling and swaying, as though drunk. Many had already fallen to the ground, blood streaming from their orifices.

Their souls had been destroyed, and they were dead.

The surviving warriors of the Dreamer Army were staring at them in bewilderment, their distant figures full of both relief and confusion. Sunny wanted to scream, warning them of the terrible danger they were in, but knew that he was too far away for anyone to hear him.

From the tall mound of coral he was standing on, he could see the graceful shining figure in their midst. He knew that Nephis must have figured out what was going on by now.

But she didn't know that the gates of the Spire were open.

'Think, think!'

Sunny lingered for a few seconds, and then raised his hand.

A moment later, a clear ringing of a silver bell spread across the Labyrinth, rolling over the remains of the Dreamer Army.

Far away on the battlefield, Nephis spun and looked in his direction.

'Come on! Come on, Neph!'

Sunny rang the Silver Bell again and waved his hand in the air.

However, there was no need. Changing Star had already moved, thrusting her sword toward the Spire. In the next moment, the Dreamer Army lunged forward. Sleepers were running with all the speed they could muster, following the command of their Lady.

"Yes! Wait… what is she doing?!"

Nephis herself did not follow her soldiers. Instead, she turned around and ran in the opposite direction.

…To the distant pillar of coral that they had left at the start of this mess.

Sunny's heart skipped a beat when he realized that she was going back for Cassie.

But there was nothing he could do to help, not anymore.

'Good luck…'

Jumping down from the mound, he rolled on the ground and ran toward the darkness of the Spire's doorway without looking back.

…However, before Sunny could reach it, he saw something falling down from the skies.

'What the…'

A ragged human figure slammed into the crimson coral and rolled several times before coming to a stop, then remained still. Sunny dashed toward it, quickly recognizing the bright colors of Kai's armor.

To his relief, the charming young man was still alive, if barely conscious. A graceful rapier was worriedly zipping in the air around him, the steel of its blade bleak and devoid of the usual luster.

The two of them must have been high up in the sky when the soul erasure had begun, much closer to its source, and so suffered more

than those of them on the ground.

Not wasting any time, Sunny grabbed Kai by the collar and dragged him toward the opened gates of the Spire. The Quiet Dancer followed.

Soon, the three of them reached the border between light and darkness. Without hesitating even for a second, Sunny dove into the cool shade, made a few steps to get deeper into its shelter, and fell to the ground.

"Ah…"

Only now, protected from the annihilating sunlight by the solid mass of the ancient tower, he realized how terrible his condition had been. But no more. His soul was finally at peace once again, whatever wounds dealt to it already healing.

Kai was still alive, too.

"Lucky bastard."

'Thank gods… uh, I mean — that fool owes me big time now!'

Breathing heavily, he checked on the unconscious archer, then sat down and stared at the blindingly bright landscape outside.

Were the... were the others going to make it?

A few seconds later, something suddenly flashed through the air. It was Caster: falling on his knees near them, he glanced at Sunny with tired eyes and then gently placed an unconscious Sleeper he had carried with him on the ground.

Without saying anything, both of them then turned to the gates of the Spire and looked into the light.

Seconds passed in torturous silence.

...And then, a human silhouette appeared out of the brightness. And then another, and another.

The survivors of the Dreamer Army had reached the island and dashed toward the life-saving darkness of the gargantuan tower. Soon, they crossed the distance separating them from the gates and dove into their shade.

Sunny watched, something sharp moving in his chest.

A torturous eternity later, he finally saw the familiar figure in white armor appear at the doorstep of the colossal structure.

Carrying Cassie, Nephis entered the shadows.

She was the last one to come.

Looking at them and at the small crowd of Sleepers gathered at the border between darkness and light, Sunny was finally able to exhale. They made it.

The battle for the Crimson Spire was over.

Now all they had to do was find the Gateway hidden somewhere inside the ancient tower.

…And survive the wrath of its master.

Chapter-333: Belly of the Beast

Sitting on the cold stone floor, Sunny inhaled deeply and looked at the people that surrounded him.

All of them were exhausted, wounded, covered in blood, dirt, barely staying conscious. Their armor was broken and torn, and their faces were deathly pale. They sat on the ground, too tired to move or talk, breathing heavily, and stared down with empty eyes.

There were so few of them left…

But also much more than he had expected.

Around a hundred Sleepers had survived the battle of the Crimson Spire. They were the strongest, the bravest… but mostly, the luckiest warriors of the Dreamer Army. Four-fifths of it had been eviscerated in the slaughter.

Not to mention another five hundred or so that had died during the bloody struggle for the throne of the Bright Castle.

This hundred was all that remained of more than a thousand humans that had been surviving on the Forgotten Shore before Changing Star had arrived in the Dark City like a brilliant omen of disaster. Like a herald of ruinous change.

But Sunny was appalled and horrified as much as he was surprised and elated. He had honestly thought that the number of people who would make it this far was going to be in the single digits.

...Looking around, he searched for familiar faces.

Nephis and Cassie were there, of course. So was Kai. Effie was slumped against a wall, dressed only in her white chiton, which was now torn and painted completely red with blood. Her armor seemed

to have been completely destroyed.

Caster was also there, bandaging a shallow wound on his shoulder. Compared to other survivors, he seemed strangely clean. However, his armor was seriously damaged, too. It seemed that even incredible speed had not been enough to avoid the fury of the nightmare horde.

Seishan stood slightly apart from the rest of them, surrounded by a dozen surviving Handmaidens. The beautiful woman was heavily injured, the luster of her skin and sparkling eyes growing bleak and dim. From what Sunny could see, she was barely alive.

He also noticed Aiko, who was sitting on the floor, wiping tears off her delicate face.

But there were also many people whom he did not see.

The scarred hunter who had welcomed them into the outer settlement after their long expedition was dead. So was Park, his nonchalant friend who had been responsible for turning Effie into a folk hero with his tales.

The talkative watchmen who had asked Sunny about his opinion on who could have killed Harus were now dead, too. So was the young man who had thought that talking to Sunny was a headache.

Stev, the ample giant that had been in charge of the Memory Market during Gunlaug's reign, did not make it. Perhaps this was why Aiko, his friend, was now silently shedding tears.

Even Gemma, the dauntless leader of the Dark City Hunters, had perished. Sunny did not know what could have killed the seemingly immortal man, but suspected that his last hunt had been a truly terrifying sight to behold. Most of the people Gemma had brought to Changing Star's faction with him were now dead, too.

And so, so many more.

Their absence pressed down on survivors like an unseen weight.

But those who survived had no time for sorrow, at least not now. They weren't free of this nightmare yet.

In fact, they had just entered the very belly of the beast.

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Turning away from the hundred Sleepers, Sunny looked into the depths of the Crimson Spire.

Once, the entire tower must have been hollow, but now there were growths of coral everywhere inside. They resembled frozen waterfalls of blood, as if rivers of it had once streamed from the top of the Spire and then suddenly turned solid. Because of that, it was hard to see what hid in the depths of the cyclopean construct. Further away, the interior of the tower was shrouded in the cold darkness.

Lingering for a few moments, Sunny decided not to send his shadow to explore. The Crimson Terror had already proven its ability to hurt it, so he was unwilling to risk the well-being of his invaluable helper.

Instead, he glanced at Neph.

Changing Star was peering into the growing brightness that drowned the Forgotten Shore. By now, the light of day outside was almost blinding. On her face, there was a strangely thoughtful expression.

As Sunny watched, she turned around and raised her head, looking in the direction of the Spire's tip.

After a while, she frowned, and then faced the surviving humans. Her calm voice echoed in the darkness of the ancient tower:

"It's time to go. Gather your strength. We are almost there!"

The Sleepers looked at her with tired eyes, the light of hope igniting in them with renewed strength. Slowly, they rose to their feet. Those who were relatively fine supported those who were seriously wounded. Those who had lost consciousness were being carried by their friends or fellow warriors.

Soon, the procession of humans headed deeper into the Spire. Nephis was walking at the front, holding Cassie by the hand. Somehow, Sunny ended up side by side with them.

Looking at the two young women, he wanted to say something, but no words came to his mind. Instead, Neph was the one who spoke.

Glancing at Sunny, she hesitated for a while, and then said:

"Thank you. For ringing that bell. And… for everything."

He looked at her for a long time, and then shrugged.

"There's no need to thank me. We are allies. Are we not?"

She smiled slightly and remained silent after that.

Soon, they passed through the barrier of coral and approached the center of the Spire.

There, the dark sea was imprisoned under an indomitable seal.

In front of them was a vast pool of black water. Its surface was perfectly still and flat, like that of a harrowing mirror made from pure darkness. Although the water was opaque and no one could see how far down that gargantuan well went, Sunny felt as though it was unimaginably deep. He felt that it reached such depths that mere thought of light would be impossible there.

As they watched in solemn silence, a subtle ripple spread across the surface of the imprisoned sea. It was as though it was straining to spill over the edges of the pool and break free. However, the invisible powers that held it down were too mighty to overcome, even for this vast, boundless, inconceivable creature.

Turning away from the eerie black mirror, Sunny peered into the darkness and frowned.

Hidden in the shadows, far away from the light of human lanterns, countless figures were standing motionlessly, staring at them.

Chapter-334: Silver Sword

At first, Sunny wanted to shout to warn everyone, but after observing the silent figures for a few moments, he changed his mind.

Hidden in darkness, countless coral golems were staring mindlessly into the distance. They were very similar to the creatures he had fought to get to the Star Sigil, but also different.

Because they weren't copies of ancient heroes… just that of mundane people.

As such, they wouldn't be too dangerous. A single Sleeper could fight dozens with ease, let alone the experienced, powerful warriors of the Dreamer Army. More than that, the golems did not seem to be hostile.

Some of them stood motionlessly, while some aimlessly wandered about. These sad, empty things were even more lifeless than Echoes. He felt that they weren't really creatures, even. Just… physical manifestations of the Crimson Terror's madness, perhaps. A representation of its broken psyche and scattered thoughts.

He was sure that each of these golems represented one of the souls that had been sacrificed to the artificial sun and had once flowed through its vessel, becoming a part of it. Forever.

…There were thousands of them, and even more had to be hidden somewhere out of sight.

Lingering for a bit, Sunny informed Nephis of his discovery. She frowned and glanced into the darkness, then nodded.

"We will be careful."

Now that they had a better understanding of the ground level of the

Crimson Spire, it became clear that the Gateway was not on it. To find it, the remains of the Dreamer Army were going to have to ascend higher.

There were no stairs or lifting mechanisms in sight, but luckily, many of the twisting coral pillars were wide enough for several people to walk on them, and not as steep as to make things too difficult. The Sleepers could use them to easily reach the next level.

…However, as soon as Sunny stepped forward, Neph suddenly pulled him back and shouted:

"Everyone, back!"

Just a moment later, a wide ray of blinding light fell from somewhere above and swiped across the interior of the Crimson Spire, annihilating the tranquil darkness.

It didn't take a genius to realize that the ray was imbued with the same soul-destroying property as the deadly beams of sunlight outside… only this one seemed much more powerful.

It was also different. Although its movements were erratic and strange, they were unmistakably aimed at the exhausted mass of human invaders and full of intent.

"Hide in the shadows!"

Swiftly, the Sleepers dove behind growths of coral and pressed themselves against them. A few unfortunate ones lingered for too long and were exposed to the light. They didn't scream or struggle, just fell down to the ground, their lives extinguished in a split moment.

The rest froze, consumed by tense fear.

Sunny found himself leaning against a slightly inclined pillar of coral, Neph and Cassie by his side. Carefully looking out, he saw the deadly beam of light grow dim and dissipate. A moment later, however, several more fell from above, tearing the darkness apart.

But that was not all.

Guided by the light, the mass of coral golems suddenly surged forward, moving toward the place where the Dreamer Army was hiding. Their movements, which were aimless and mindless before, were now full of malevolent will.

'...Crap.'

Turning to Nephis, he summoned the Midnight Shard and asked:

"What now?"

She lingered for a bit, and then said evenly:

"Someone will have to attack the Crimson Terror directly to draw its attention away."

Sunny smiled, feeling a strong sense of deja vu.

"And who might that be?"

Changing Star sighed and took a step back, summoning her silver sword.

"...Me. It has to be me."

He frowned, feeling very reluctant to say his next words. But in the end, he still couldn't help but say them:

"Are you crazy? That's a Fallen Terror we're talking about!"

Nephis didn't answer, instead looking up, as though trying to discern the source of the blinding rays of annihilating light.

Sunny gritted his teeth and added:

"Alright, whatever. Say someone really needs to distract that thing. But why does it have to be you alone? Because you are the great daughter of the Immortal Flame clan? Don't tell me that you started to believe in your own bullcrap!"

Neph gave him a strange look and then shook her head.

"No. It can only be me because of my sword."

Sunny stared at the silver longsword, confused. A lifetime ago, after their first meeting on the Forgotten Shore, Nephis and Cassie had told him about their Memories. The sword in particular had an extremely rare enhancement…

"I am the only human on the Forgotten Shore who has a Memory that grants them a measure of protection against soul attacks. So I am the only one who can approach the Terror and survive."

It was hard to debate against logic. Still, Sunny was not done voicing his objections… only that Changing Star didn't give him a chance to.

Turning to Cassie, she took the blind girl by the hand and said:

"Cas. Give me your wing cloak."

A few seconds later, the transparent fabric of the Dark Wing appeared on her shoulder. Without wasting any time, she then looked at Sunny.

"Once I'm gone, lead the people to the Gateway. Make sure that everyone escapes."

With that, Nephis bent her knees, and then jumped with all her might. Supported by the enchanted cloak, she shot up with considerable speed, then pushed herself off the pillar of coral and flew into the darkness.

The ray of light swiped in her direction, but Changing Star somehow managed to dodge it, crashed into another coral growth, and launched herself off of it a moment before another annihilating beam of light had reached it.

With most rays now pursuing Nephis as she leaped from one coral pillar to another, ascending higher and higher, the Dreamer Army could once again move.

Gritting his teeth, Sunny glanced at the hundred frightened people and yelled:

"Follow me!"

Chapter-335: Ascent

Sunny had never expected to become a leader of anyone, let alone of a hundred desperate people. But now, that was exactly the situation he found himself in.

To add insult to injury, he was really the best person for the job.

Not because of any kind of leadership qualities, but simply for the fact that he could see in the dark. Now that the rays of soul-destroying light were led away by Nephis, he could also let his shadow free and send it forward to explore and search for the Gateway.

So if anyone could guide the remains of the Dreamer Army to it, it was him.

'How the hell…'

Hiding his unease deep inside, Sunny projected nothing but absolute confidence and shouted for everyone to follow him. Surprisingly, the Sleepers did just that without voicing any objections.

'Confidence is easily confused for competence, I guess.'

Of course, the fact that he was affiliated with Changing Star in some capacity helped a lot, even if most people were not completely sure how and to what extent.

Taking Cassie's hand, Sunny dove out of his cover and dashed toward a wide, spiraling coral root that reached high into the darkness above. He could hear the sound of footsteps following him from behind.

The Dreamer Army was on the move once again.

Jumping on the root, Sunny sent the shadow forward and glanced at the approaching sea of coral golems. There was still time.

He ran forward, using the coral growth as stairs. A second later, he yelled:

"Those at the back! Ready your weapons!"

They did so while the first rows of Sleepers followed Sunny up. Almost everyone had time to climb onto the root by the time the first of the golems showed up.

The coral figure stumbled from the darkness, only to be met by a flash of a sword. It crumbled instantly, offering almost no resistance.

But a moment later, several more appeared, and then more, and more.

The Sleepers destroyed the first wave to buy themselves a few moments and then jumped onto the root, then dashed away, soon catching up with the rest of the survivors.

At the head of them, Sunny hesitated for a moment. Thanks to the shadow, he knew that the wide coral growth they were ascending was soon going to twist upward at an almost vertical angle and grow much more narrow.

Luckily, there was another one crossing it just a few meters ahead, separated by a very small gap.

Picking Cassie up, he took a step forward and jumped, landing on the other root, then turned around and moved in the opposite direction to the one they had been going... but still upward.

Behind him, the Sleepers repeated his jump. And down below, the wave of golems was already climbing on the twisting roots to pursue them.

'Damn it. I guess they can climb!'

He ran forward, struggling against the steep incline, then suddenly froze and looked up. There, a few dozen meters away, a wide gallery

circled around the empty expanse of the Crimson Spire.

And on it, another mass of golems was surging in the direction of the Dreamer Army. Countless twisted figures were appearing from the chaotic mess of crimson coral and rushing forward, searching for a path to reach them. Many fell off the edge of the gallery and plunged down, to explode into shards once they hit the floor.

But some fell right on the root he was standing on.

Gritting his teeth, Sunny looked back and noticed a familiar tall figure close by. Effie stared at him tiredly and forced out a smile:

"What is it now?"

He put Cassie on the ground and gently pushed her toward the huntress.

"Take care of her for me, alright?"

Effie waved a hand, letting him know that she got it.

Sunny watched the two of them for a moment, then turned around and summoned the Midnight Shard.

A few seconds later, he reached the first golem and slashed it with his sword. The golem's body offered some resistance, but no more than a mundane creature would. It almost disintegrated under his assault, crumbling easily into a pile of broken coral.

'Not too bad…'

Curiously, the Spell did not congratulate him on the kill. Just as Sunny had suspected, these things were not really living creatures.

That was going to make things a tiny bit easier.

Running past the destroyed construct, Sunny soon approached another one and pushed it off the root with one strike of the Midnight Shard's pommel. The golems were not that dangerous…

At least not in small numbers.

He led the Dreamer Army forward, climbing higher and higher. Every couple of minutes, they would have to leave one root and make use of another, sometimes moving across stone galleries that were situated here and there on the walls of the Crimson Spire.

At some point, both the vanguard of the human procession and its rear became embroiled in a rolling melee with the sea of coral golems. Those in the middle only had to keep their eyes on the layers of coral and stone structures overhead to make sure that nothing fell on them.

This battle was not too terrible, however. The constructs were slower and weaker than even the mundane humans whose visage they were meant to recreate, not to mention almost completely mindless. Not a single human had fell to their attacks yet.

…That was not to say that surviving the onslaught of countless golems was easy.

Somewhere high above, meanwhile, the flashes of white light slowly turned into one continuous, radiant halo. Nephis was probably already approaching the very pinnacle of the ancient tower. The fact that none of the annihilating rays had returned to attack the Sleepers served as proof that she was still alive, drawing the attention of the Terror away from them.

'Where are you… where are you…'

At the head of the Dreamer Army, Sunny cut through another golem and suppressed a curse.

Where was the damn Gateway?!

…And just as he thought that, the shadow finally found what it had been looking for all that time.

Their way back to the real world.

Chapter-336: The Gateway

Out there in the darkness, a vast balcony was built into the wall of the tower, reaching almost to the center of the gargantuan structure. On its surface, broken pillars of marble were overgrown by the everpresent streaks of crimson coral. They led to a circular dais, with a wide iron ring submerged into its stone surface.

Around the ring, a beautiful pattern of runes was shimmering with familiar light. They were just like those runes that every Awakened had seen countless times when communicating with the Spell.

But that wasn't the first reason why Sunny had noticed it. The most unusual thing about the dais was that unlike everything else inside of the Spire, it was utterly devoid of growths of crimson coral. The stone surface surrounding the ring was strangely clean and untouched by it.

Looking at the shimmering runes and the iron rings through his shadow, Sunny felt something move in his heart.

He was sure that this was the Gateway.

They were so close…

As he watched it, the whole Spire suddenly shuddered. Massive pieces of coral broke off and fell down, crashing into other branches down below. Suddenly, the darkness that surrounded the Dreamer Army became less impenetrable.

High above them, the radiant halo of light became several times more bright.

…Nephis had reached the Crimson Terror.

With a somber grimace, Sunny escaped from his reverie and dashed forward, slicing several golems as he went. The frightened Sleepers

followed, entrusting their fates into his hands.

As more and more tremors ran through the ancient tower and several enormous pillars of coral completely collapsed, they ascended even higher and approached the vast balcony.

And then, finally, Sunny jumped down and landed on solid stone.

Shattering a few golems, he cleared enough space for others to follow and watched several more people reach the balcony. One after another, the Sleepers jumped off the treacherous coral and joined him. Those who were the first to catch up repelled the attacking golems to let the others come down.

Soon, all hundred of them were on the balcony — and just in time. A few seconds later, a tremendous piece of debris fell from above, pulverizing the branch of coral they had used to get there.

Sunny lingered for a few moments, watching as crimson pieces rained down, and then turned away with a determined expression.

"Come on! We're almost there!"

The remains of the Dreamer Army cut through the mass of golems and escaped it. Running with all the speed they could manage, the crowd of young men and women approached the Gateway and froze, stunned by the sight of it.

Hypnotized by it.

In front of them... was the hope that they had forgotten for so long.

The torturous promise of freedom that had taunted them every day, hidden away in the terrifying, looming silhouette of the Crimson Spire.

Their way home.

Salvation.

Most of them had spent so long on the Forgotten Shore that the thought of ever being able to escape it became nothing more than a

distant dream. Even when they had followed Changing Star and chose to believe her promises, salvation was just a concept. An idea.

Now that they saw it as a real thing, many did not know how to react.

…Well, Sunny was there to make the process easier.

"What are you staring at, idiots?! Pick up your jaws and move! Battle formation! Protect the rear! Wounded and non-combatants go first, everyone else holds off the damn golems and then follows! One at a time, bastards!"

Coming back to their senses thanks to his angry shout, the Sleepers quickly reorganized themselves. Those who could still fight faced away from the Gateway and formed a defensive line, protecting the wounded with their bodies. Those who couldn't helped the people in the worst condition enter the iron ring.

Sunny watched as the first human was placed in the center of the Gateway. A moment later, the runes surrounding the ring flashed with shimmering light. The body of the Sleeper suddenly shone, too. The ghostly shine was dim at first, but then grew brighter and brighter. Soon, it was hard to distinguish the shape of the human body at the center of that light.

And then, the light dissipated, much like a Memory or an Echo would, leaving nothing behind.

After all these years, all that suffering, all that loss, the first Sleeper had finally escaped the Forgotten Shore.

Looking through the emptiness left by the disappearance, Sunny realized that he had forgotten to breathe.

A second later, an exhilarated cheer rose above the crowd of humans. The intensity of emotion in their voices… no words existed to describe the complicated, overwhelming conflagration of feelings burning in the chests of the survivors of the Dreamer Army at that moment.

Well, at least Sunny had none.

In the next moment, the pursuing wave of golems crashed into the defensive line, and the next human stepped into the Gateway.

The defenders held their ground, throwing the coral creatures back.

Sunny lingered at the edge of the dais, watching the crowd of humans. One after another, they were disappearing into the beautiful radiance of the Gateway, while the others continued to confidently repel the assault of the golems.

They were going to survive.

That meant that his job here was done.

…And, just as he had expected, Caster was nowhere to be seen.

Lingering for a few short moments, Sunny glanced at the Gateway one last time and then stepped away.

As he moved through the crowd of humans and approached its edge, someone suddenly called out his name.

Turning his head, Sunny saw Effie. The huntress was carrying the unconscious body of Kai on one shoulder, and keeping Cassie close to her own under another. The blind girl's face was ashen, confused, and empty.

"Doofus! Where are you going?"

Sunny stared at her for a few moments, and then suddenly smiled.

"...There's just some unfinished business I need to deal with. Take care, you three. I will… see you later. I hope."

With that, he took a step back and disappeared into the shadows.

Chapter-337: Nobody

Summoning the Dark Wing and the Prowling Thorn, Sunny jumped off the edge of the stone balcony. In the next second, his dagger pierced the darkness and bit into a fractured coral branch high above. With a sharp pull, Sunny sent himself flying upward, the transparent cloak turning into a blur behind his back.

All around him, the interior of the Crimson Spire that remained unchanged for thousands of years was shifting. The ancient tower continued to shudder and quake as it endured the calamitous consequences of the battle between Changing Star and the vessel of the artificial sun.

Vast coral roots were shattering and plunging down, drowning the echoing expanse of the Spire with deafening clangor. As massive slabs of coral collided against lower branches, they were pulverized in turn.

Moving through all this destruction, Sunny struggled to stay alive.

Before he could even reach the root he had been aiming for, it was obliterated by falling debris. The mass of coral then rained down, threatening to bury Sunny under its deadly weight. Not phased, he twisted and hurled the Prowling Thorn sideways, then flew out of the way of the collapsing coral.

Just a second later, Sunny hit the side of an intact root and pushed himself off its surface, continuing to ascend.

He spun and twisted, using the Prowling Thorn and every surface he could reach to dodge the falling slabs of coral, avoid being cut to pieces by deadly clouds of flying splinters, and soar higher and higher.

As he did, the shadow jumped from one root to another, searching for

Caster.

The Legacy was much faster than Sunny, but was chained to the ground and didn't have the advantage of being able to see in the dark. Sunny was certain that he would be able to catch up to him before too long.

And after a few torturous minutes, he inevitably did.

Emerging from a cloud of coral dust, Sunny left a crimson trail in the air as he landed on a wide root in a nimble roll. A moment later, he jumped to his feet and stood silently in the darkness, waiting for Caster to appear.

Up here, at the highest levels of the Spire, the chaos was not as pronounced. Those branches of coral that were going to break had already fallen, and the few remaining ones were relatively stable. That allowed Sunny to predict which route the Legacy was going to take.

The cool polished wood of the Weaver's Mask rested comfortably on his face, hiding his features.

Sunny wasn't sure what resources and connections the Han Li clan possessed, so he chose to be extra careful. He was wary of someone tracing Caster's death back to him with the help of a prophetic Aspect Ability or some strange and powerful Memory… a vengeful Legacy clan was the last thing he would want to deal with after returning to the real world.

And by now, he was sure that one of the two of them was going to die here, in this cursed and dreadful tower.

This confrontation was long overdue.

He was also wary of Caster himself. The proud scion was many things, but a fool was not one of them. There was a chance that he had long guessed Sunny's Flaw.

The mask was his insurance against that eventuality.

'Let's see which one of us is better… let's see which one of us deserves

it more…'

For Sunny, this fight was not only about defeating Caster. It wasn't even about defending Neph.

It was about defeating the world itself.

A lifetime ago, when he and Caster had first met in the Academy, they were on the opposite sides of humanity.

One was on the top, and the other was on the bottom.

One was strong and surrounded by a circle of admirers, and the other one was weak and alone. One had the best education, the best mentors, the vast resources of his powerful family, the inherited arsenal of Memories, and plenty of soul shards to propel him forward to future success.

The other had nothing.

Sunny had always had nothing. No family and no home, no place to call his own, no one to care about whether he lived or died, no opportunity, no chance… no future.

Thrust into the same hell as Caster, he clawed and fought, suffered and endured, survived and bettered himself through will, intellect, and countless brushes with death. And now, a year later, he was ready to claim his rightful place.

By defeating Caster, he was going to prove once and for all that he wasn't lesser than anyone. That he wasn't some inconsequential nobody to be discarded and forgotten, to be lost on the pages of history. That he mattered as much as those "real" humans did.

That he was as exceptional as the best of them, despite the fact that he wasn't born into wealth and prosperity.

…Much more so, even.

As Sunny waited in the darkness, a light of a Memory lantern swiftly approached from below.

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Caster was rushing to the pinnacle of the Spire, using his incredible speed and training to avoid being killed by the falling debris. He was already getting close when, suddenly, the light of his lantern fell on a motionless figure that stood in the center of a wide coral root, barring his way.

Dark armor weaved out of soft fabric, with lusterless black leather protecting vital spots. An austere blade held lightly, its tip turned to the ground. The wooden mask that resembled the face of a fearsome demon was new, but still, he had no problem recognizing who was in front of him.

Slowing down and stopping a few meters away from the hateful little vagrant, Caster gritted his teeth and spat:

"It's you."

Hidden behind the mask, Sunny smiled.

"No, no. You are mistaken. Actually, it's not me."

Then, tilting his head, he stared at the proud Legacy and said, his voice full of surprise:

"Oh! Hey, Caster. What a coincidence, to run into you here of all places. So unexpected! Ah, it must be fate…"

Chapter-338: Rest of the Mongrels

Caster remained silent for a while, then calmly looked up, at the furiously pulsating radiance of the Crimson Terror's light. Finally, he lowered his head and exhaled through gritted teeth.

"Out of my way, Sunny."

Sunny blinked a couple of times, then said in a humorless tone:

"Or what?"

The Legacy grimaced and stared at him darkly, his face full of resentment.

"I am so tired of you and your insolence. Why must you always ruin everything? Why can't you just know your place?"

Summoning his beautiful jian, Caster shook his head and said:

"Stay out of this if you value your life. This is the last chance I am going to give you."

Sunny did not move, watching the young man silently. There was nothing but darkness in the eyes of the disturbing black mask. A few moments later, his voice resounded from behind it, strangely hollow:

"...Know my place? What is my place, in your eyes? Huh, Caster?"

The Legacy smiled slightly and then said naturally, as though stating a fact:

"Out of the sight of those better than you, with the rest of the mongrels. What else?"

Sunny shifted slightly. When he spoke, his tone was unexpectedly carefree and friendly:

"Ah, not exactly what I expected to hear. Well, never mind. Before we do this, though, can I ask you one question?"

Caster snarled.

"Sure. Go ahead."

This was something that had been pressing on Sunny's mind for a long time.

"Why do you want to kill Nephis? What is so important that you are even willing to risk your life?"

The Legacy looked at him with heavy eyes. After a few moments, he said in a strange tone:

"This is not something that you, scum, will ever understand. Survival is all you creatures care about. Duty. Loyalty. Honor. Those are the words the likes of you know nothing about.

So I will put it in a way that will be easy even for you to comprehend."

He pierced him with an intense gaze and said, each word falling like an avalanche:

"The Immortal Flame must be destroyed."

And then, his voice ringing with profound inevitability, Caster added:

"...This is the will of the Sovereigns."

Sunny stared at him for a bit, engrossed in the solemn atmosphere of this proclamation.

A few seconds later, in a sincerely confused tone, he asked:

"Uh… who?"

Caster's eyes widened. He looked at Sunny with a dumbfounded

expression, then shook his head in disbelief.

"Wait… you… you really don't know? She didn't tell you anything?"

Sunny scratched the back of his head.

"...Of course she did? Actually, I know exactly what you're talking about. I've been told everything. No one knows more than me on this topic, really."

The Legacy stared at him for a few moments, then suddenly threw his head back and laughed out loud.

"Mongrel… you don't even know who you serve! You don't even know who rules the world you live in. Why am I even wasting my breath talking to a worm like you?"

Sunny tilted his head, then said in a reproachful tone:

"Ouch. That stings."

Caster smiled darkly, then raised his sword.

"Enough of this! I'm done trying to reason with you, fool. I have allowed you to sculk in the shadows, playing your vulgar games, for long enough. I only permitted you to live because there was no reason to get rid of you. What, do you think that you… you! Can defeat me?

That your little schemes and secrets will give you a chance against a true Legacy? Sorry to disappoint, but I figured them out a long time ago."

Sunny remained silent for a bit and then asked in an indifferent tone:

"Oh yeah? Do tell. What are my secrets, exactly?"

The Legacy grinned:

"You hide your strength and pretend to be weak. You go around telling ridiculous tales, making everyone think that you are a lunatic. At first, I thought that you have lost your mind, too. But once I

started paying attention, it was so obvious. The constant misdirections, the obnoxious bragging that no sane person would ever believe, the crazy act… this is your Flaw, isn't it?"

As Sunny tensed, Caster smiled triumphantly and said:

"...You are compelled to lie against your will. Did you really think that no one would see the pattern? You even bribed that idol friend of yours to try and mislead everyone. A pathetic attempt. Were you expecting that anyone would buy it?"

Sunny stared at him for a few moments, and then exploded with laughter.

"Ah, crap. You got me! Yes, you are right. This is my Flaw. What sane person would go around telling such outrageous lies?!"

Then, he pierced Caster with a murderous gaze and said:

"...Sadly, it seems that I am at a disadvantage in that regard. It is such a shame that I have no idea what your Flaw is, huh? That I haven't figured it out a long time ago, too."

Caster looked at him, a corner of his mouth turning downward. In the light of the Memory lantern, he looked handsome and confident.

...Mature.

There was a short beard on his face, and a few grey hairs in his luscious mane.

Hidden behind the mask, Sunny smiled:

"It is so sad that I don't know that your powerful, incredible, amazing Aspect Ability shortens your lifespan every time you use it, and that you reverse its effect on your body with a charm Memory in the shape of a sandglass. Ah, if only I was more observant! Too bad I am not."

The Legacy stared at him with a dark expression, his face slowly turning pale. After a while, he uttered:

"...It doesn't matter. After I fulfill my duty and return to the real world, the Awakening will allow me to take back the years that had been stolen from me. While you, rat, will stay in this cursed place fo…"

Before he was done talking, a heavy triangular blade suddenly flew into his face. As a hint of outrage gleamed in Caster's eyes, he easily swatted the kunai away… and turned into a blur, lunging at Sunny with astonishing speed.

Invisible to a human eye, the string of the Prowling Thorn was wrapped around two coral outcroppings, drawn across the wide root right ahead of him. And the proud Legacy was about to…

A green light flashed through the air, and Sunny felt his wrist jerk back, the tension of the string suddenly gone.

'Cr…'

A fraction of a second later, Caster was upon him.

Chapter-339: Better, Faster, Stronger

'Fast… too fast…'

Caster was moving with astonishing speed, his figure turning into a blur. His Flaw was a cruel one, but the power of the Aspect Ability he possessed was also incredible.

In fact, Sunny had never met anyone with an Ability as powerful as this, with the exception of himself and Nephis. Even the greatest warriors on the Forgotten Shore would have had no chance against it. Gemma, Effie, Seishan… all of them would have been easily killed by the deadly scion of the Han Li clan.

Perhaps only Harus could have fought him to a draw.

But even then, Sunny wasn't sure. Not only did Caster possess a terrifying Ability, but he was also one of the most skilled swordsmen of their generation. He also had a whole arsenal of Memories hidden away inside his soul. Surely, he had a way to fight while blinded.

…That's why Sunny did not waste any time trying to destroy the Memory lantern illuminating their surroundings. Instead, he just trusted his sword, and met Caster's attack with his own.

Two swords collided in the air, and in the next moment, Caster flew past Sunny and slowed down, eventually coming to a stop. A drop of blood fell off the tip of his jian.

Sunny staggered.

'Curse you…'

The sleeve of the Puppeteer's Shroud was torn, and there was a

shallow cut on his shoulder. He had managed to deflect the strike aimed at his heart, but wasn't fast enough to avoid being wounded after all.

On Caster's face, there was a dark expression. Looking at Sunny, who was still alive, he grimaced and spat:

"Not bad. This is going to be entertaining, at least."

Hidden behind the mask, Sunny grinned.

"Oh, yeah. I'm having a lot of fun myself, thanks."

Of course, that was a lie.

Back in the Academy, Caster had been the only person to defeat Nephis. Granted, all of them had been much weaker back then. Neph also had not used her Aspect Ability, while Sunny was using his to augment himself right now.

Because of it, the gap in speed between the two of them was not completely lethal. And yet, he was incomparably slower. In terms of pure physical ability, Sunny had no hope of surviving this duel.

…But he already knew the secret of how one had to fight against Caster. He had learned it from Changing Star herself, during that short and fateful spar.

A year ago, Nephis had been in a similar situation, and yet almost defeated her swift enemy. She had anticipated Caster's moves instead of reacting to them, and due to that, his speed advantage had been made less severe. This was what Sunny had to do now.

Of course, to achieve such a feat, one had to possess an intricate understanding of the underlying laws of combat and a true mastery of both their mind and their body.

Luckily, Sunny was one such man. He had obtained clarity a long time ago, and spent every waking hour sharpening his skill and instincts. His mind had entered into the state of flow, making his perception stark and all-encompassing, his thoughts quicker. His intuition was enhanced by the knowledge of the essence of battle.

…That gave him a chance to win.

A moment later, Caster attacked again, and Sunny jerked the Midnight Shard sideways, blocking the ghostly green jian at the last possible moment.

'Up…'

He had begun to chain the next move even before the two blades collided. A split second later, the Legacy brought down his sword in a downward slash, aiming at Sunny's head. However, it was deflected…

'Thrust at the neck…'

…once again, sliding down the length of the tachi and biting Sunny in the shoulder. This time, the leather pauldron of his armor held, but just barely.

Almost instantly, Caster pulled the jian back and then immediately thrust it forward, aiming to cut the enemy's throat. The Midnight Shard awkwardly pushed the gleaming blade away, but not fast enough — another shallow cut appeared on Sunny's neck, seeping with blood.

'Damn it!'

Infuriated, Sunny tried to counterattack, but was forced to concentrate on nothing but defense. Dozens of strikes rained on him in a span of a couple of seconds, filling the echoing expanse of the Crimson Spire with the clangor of steel. More and more cuts appeared on his body — none of them were too deep or dangerous, but that didn't make them less painful.

No matter how cunning and perfect Sunny's movements were, he couldn't make up for his lack of speed completely. Months of training, hundreds of battles, countless hours spent gaining insight into the inner workings of swordsmanship... Caster had done all of that, too, and then some. And he was so much faster.

But, somehow, Sunny was still alive. Not only was he alive, he wasn't even seriously injured… yet.

At some point, he feinted a block and dodged the blade of Caster's sword instead, then whipped his empty hand forward, as though trying to punch the Legacy in the head.

At the last moment, however, a ghostly stiletto appeared in his hand.

…Only to be thrown aside by a powerful hit of the jian. Sunny barely managed to save his arm from being severed at the wrist.

Sparing him a contemptuous glance, Caster snarled:

"Cretin! Have you forgotten that I was there when Changing Star gave you that Memory?!"

Sunny gritted his teeth and lashed out with the austere tachi, buying himself a moment to regroup.

"I guess it slipped my mind!"

With that, he suddenly hurled the Moonlight Shard at the Legacy, then followed it with a fearsome thrust of his sword. Caster easily dodged the stiletto, deflected the tachi, and kicked him in the stomach, sending Sunny staggering back with a pained moan.

For a fraction of a second, he was wide open.

His enemy did not miss that opportunity, turning into a blur as he lunged forward. The gleaming jian flashed through the air, and at the same time, Sunny suddenly spun and twisted his body.

The two of them almost brushed against each other as Caster flew by.

A moment later, Sunny shuddered and bent over, blood streaming from a deep wound on his side.

The Legacy turned around and smiled cruelly, a hint of satisfaction reflecting in his eyes.

"...Not so boisterous now, are you, worm?"

Sunny groaned and slowly straightened his back, pressing one hand against his bleeding side. His voice sounded strained and solemn:

"Ah, yes. That… that didn't go exactly as planned."

Then, he tilted his head and raised his other hand, staring at the object dangling from a torn chain that was gripped in it.

Suddenly, Caster's hand shot toward his neck.

"You…"

Sunny grinned and dangled the sandglass charm in the air.

"Wait… wow! How did this thing get here?"

Caster gritted his teeth, and the stolen Memory immediately began to radiate a subtle white glow. He was trying to dismiss the charm and return it to his soul core.

…Before that happened, however, Sunny caught it and clenched his fist, ruthlessly shattering the crystal hourglass into tiny pieces.

Caster's eyes widened.

"Bastard!"

As his shout resounded in the darkness, the shards of the precious Memory flew to the ground, turning into sparks of light and disappearing as they fell.

Chapter-340: Honor

For a few seconds, both of them stood without motion. On Caster's face, shock and disbelief were mixed with fury, indignation… and fear.

Slowly, he raised his head and pierced Sunny with a hateful gaze.

"You scum..."

His voice was trembling with suppressed rage.

'Good. Rage is good. Anything that makes him lose control is g…'

In the next moment, Sunny got hit in the chest and flew back with a pained scream. Although he somehow managed to deflect the tip of the enchanted jian, the Legacy still ended up slamming into him like a speeding train. The blade of his sword pierced the Puppeteer's Shroud once again, slicing Sunny's forearm.

'Godammit!'

This was just unfair. The Shroud was a tier-five Memory of the Awakened Rank. Where did the bastard find a weapon that could cut through it so easily?!

…Well, Sunny more or less knew where. Who was to say that the ghostly green jian wasn't of the same tier, if not higher? Legacy clans had a lot of powerful Memories in their treasuries.

Unlike him.

Hitting the ground in a roll, Sunny dashed to the side and used the pommel of the Midnight Shard to slam Caster's hand away. He barely saved himself from being decapitated.

Shaken, Sunny threw a handful of coral dust into the air and

retreated. A moment later, his enemy emerged from the dust like a vengeful demon. The damned jian was once again aimed at his heart.

But…

Caster looked different.

It seemed that Sunny was right on the money with his guess about the proud scion's Flaw and the purpose of the mysterious charm Memory. Before, Caster had already looked slightly older than the other members of the cohort… which was strange, considering that both Effie and Kai were supposed to be the oldest among them.

This was what had initially caught Sunny's attention, because back at the Academy, there had been no such difference.

However, now that the crystal sandglass was broken, time seemed to be catching up with the Legacy. If anyone were to see him now, they would have assumed that he was in his late twenties, perhaps even early thirties.

He still resembled the youth that Sunny had met just a year ago, but just barely. Instead, a handsome, mature, powerful man was attacking him, his dark skin still smooth, but already showing the signs of future wrinkles at the corners of his eyes and mouth. There were several silver hairs in his beard.

Straining every muscle in his body, Sunny stood his ground and parried the deadly thrust, then dodged to the left. Once again, he was a fraction of a second late, and another cut appeared on his body.

'Curses!'

With a pained grimace, Sunny dodged, evaded, parried and blocked, continuing to retreat and create distance between himself and Caster. At some point, a furious roar made his ears ring:

"Get back here, you rat! Why are you running like a coward?!"

Hidden behind the mask and struggling to breathe, Sunny gritted his teeth and hissed:

"No… reason… in particular…"

The next time he and Caster clashed, the Legacy appeared to be in his late thirties. Now, he resembled a man in his prime. His powerful physique became even more formidable, his broad shoulders straining the metal of the sturdy scale armor. His temples were grey, and his beard had silver streaks running through it. He looked like the kind of older man young girls would be utterly smitten by.

Sunny groaned as he felt another laceration appear on his body, pushed Caster away, then dashed back. The Midnight Shard flew from one side to another, from low to high, not stopping even for a split second. The ringing of steel fused into a continuous, deafening clamor. He felt as though his lungs were on fire, but couldn't allow himself to slow down even for a moment.

A momentary lapse was going to cost him his life.

'Come on… this… this is not much worse than facing… against… Saint…'

But it was worse. So much worse…

Even while augmented by the shadow, Sunny couldn't resist Caster's furious onslaught. He was stronger and much more resilient, but that was the thing about sharp weapons — they were created to make the amount of force required to kill someone much less demanding. A skilled swordsman that relied on speed could dispatch of an enemy with one well-aimed touch of the blade.

To someone like Sunny, Caster was a nightmare. If not for the Blood Weave, he would have grown weak and slow from blood loss a long time ago, just from the numerous cuts on his body.

And yet, he resisted and continued to retreat, desperately deflecting one lightning-fast strike after another.

…The next time Sunny got a good look at the proud Legacy, he felt a cold shiver run down his spine.

Attacking him was an old man. His gaunt face was laced with a spiderweb of wrinkles, and his hair and beard were completely grey.

There was almost no sign left of the handsome youth he had known… and despised… for so long.

Caster was still full of power and vigor, though. His fury was still as murderous and scathing as it had been before. His speed, however… was just a tiny bit slower.

"Die, mongrel!"

With a furious roar, Caster brought down the ghostly jian down on Sunny, who was still reeling from the previous blow. Desperate, Sunny raised his tachi into an awkward semblance of a block. When their swords collided, the Midnight Shard flew aside and almost slid from his hands.

…What's worse, Sunny lost his balance and fell backward, landing on the ground in a heap.

As a cruel smile appeared on the old man's weathered face, he lunged forward to finish the defenseless enemy.

…But at the last second, a calm voice resounded from behind his back.

The voice he hated, but knew so well.

Standing somewhere behind him, Nephis ordered in a tone that denied refusal:

"Back!"

Caster's eyes widened. With an expression of utter terror, he spun around and raised his sword, ready to finally face the person he had dreaded and wanted to kill for so long.

However, when he did, he saw nothing but emptiness.

There was no one behind him. Just a simple rock laying on the ground.

As Caster watched in confusion, his thoughts slow due to the debilitating effect of age, the rock shouted in Changing Star's voice:

"Hide in the shadows!"

Almost immediately, the proud scion's pupils narrowed. With a dark grimace, he spun back, moving his sword into a defensive position.

...He was just a fraction of a second late.

Without making any sound, the tip of the Midnight Shard pierced his scale armor, his flesh…

And then his heart.

Staring at the stunned face of the feeble old man in front of him, Sunny scowled and sighed.

Caster looked down, at the blade protruding from his chest and the blood streaming from beneath, then weakly grabbed the tachi with his hand. A pained, resentful grimace contorted his pale, wrinkled face.

Straining to raise his head, he looked Sunny in the eyes and whispered:

"You… you have no… no honor."

Sunny stared at the dying old man with pity, then looked away.

"...There is honor, indeed. Honor... is not just a word powerful scumbags invented to make young fools like you die for them. And kill for them. It's not a chain that they wrapped around your neck, to make you a slave."

Caster looked at him for a few moments, trying to say something, but then slowly fell to his knees.

In the sudden silence, the voice of the Spell whispered:

[You have slain a dormant human, Han Li Caster.]

[Your shadow grows stronger!]

Chapter-341: One Thousand

Standing above Caster's corpse, Sunny tilted his head slightly.

Despite his expectations, there was not a lot of joy in his heart. Instead, defeating the powerful scion of a true Legacy clan left him feeling somber, and a little bitter.

There was, however, a sense of… if not validation, then at least vindication. It was as though some profound need in his soul was finally satisfied, making it more solid.

Steady.

With a pained groan, Sunny took a step back, turned around, and dismissed the Weaver's Mask.

He was in better shape than he had expected to be. Countless cuts on his body were painful, but not dangerous. Blood Weave was diligently doing its job, preventing him from losing too much of the precious red liquid. The cuts were already starting to scab over and close.

The only serious wound was the gash on his side, but it, too, had already stopped bleeding. Very soon, it was going to start healing, too. Until then, it was not going to hinder his movements a lot, as long as Sunny was ready to endure a bit of suffering.

After a year on the Forgotten Shore, dealing with pain was one of his best trained skills.

'...I've been through worse. Much worse. This is nothing.'

Then, another thought entered his mind.

'That shadow fragment… it should have brought me to a thousand,

right?'

A moment later, he realized that his whole being was somehow… weird. It felt as though there was intense heat in his chest, slowly growing more and more scalding. This sensation was not exactly physical, but more of a spiritual one. Like the core of his soul was undergoing a violent change.

With a mix of anticipation and dread, Sunny concentrated on this feeling.

'Here we go…'

What was going to happen to him?

Suddenly, he heard the voice of the Spell again. In the eerie expanse of the Crimson Spire, where ancient darkness fused with otherworldly light, it sounded solemn and almost… triumphant?

[Your shadow is overflowing with power.]

Sunny listened tensely, trying to guess what was it going to say next.

[Your shadow is taking shape.]

In the next moment, he staggered and fell to his knees. His eyes widened and lost focus.

The heat that was building up in Sunny's soul had reached a critical point, and then exploded. It felt as though his core was being torn apart, drowning him with intense, indescribable pain. Disoriented and frightened, he tried to scream, but no sound came out of his mouth.

Something was emerging from within his soul, ripping it into shreds. Sunny knew that he couldn't stop that process, and so, all he could do was endure.

As Sunny convulsed on the ground, the Spell whispered:

[...Your shadow is complete.]

And then, something strange happened.

The Spell was about to say something else, but then the entire Crimson Spire suddenly shuddered. This quake was much stronger than all the previous ones, making it feel as though the gargantuan structure was about to topple. Sunny heard the deafening sound of breaking stone.

Almost at the same time, he was suddenly enveloped in absolute darkness, all light disappearing from the echoing interior of the ancient tower.

…And the Spell abruptly fell quiet, its last proclamation left unsaid.

The pain tearing his soul apart was also gone. It didn't feel as though the process was finished, though. It felt as though it was interrupted.

'Wha… what is happening?'

Confused and disoriented, Sunny looked around.

Why was it so dark?

Following a premonition, he then raised his head and glanced up.

'...What?'

The furious light of the Crimson Terror was gone.

As Sunny tried to wrap his head around this fact, two things registered in his mind.

The first one was that he felt very strange. His chest was still full of ethereal heat, but there was also something else. Some kind of… interference? He was having trouble finding words to describe that sensation, but knew that it wasn't harmful. At least not immediately.

The second one was that…

'Crap!'

The second thing he noticed was that, currently, there were giant

slabs of stone plunging down on his head.

Picking himself up from the ground, Sunny dashed to the edge of the wide root and jumped off of it. Just a second later, one of the slabs crushed into the coral, turning it into dust. A violent shockwave hit him in the back.

The Prowling Thorn was currently restoring itself in the Soul Sea, its invisible string cut by Caster's enchanted jian, so, for a moment, Sunny found himself in free fall. Then, the transparent blur of the Dark Wing finally weaved itself from sparks of light on his back and allowed him to glide forward, following the momentum of the jump.

As he reached the wall of the Spire, another deafening crash resounded from behind. Looking up and at the descending mass of broken stone, Sunny thrust the Moonlight Shard forward. The tip of the Ascended Memory easily sunk into the ancient granite, giving him purchase.

Hanging on it, he pressed himself against the cold stones and gritted his teeth, waiting for the avalanche of debris to pass and praying that nothing hits him. A few moments later, the Spire shuddered again, and then grew still.

Somewhere down below, destruction was still raining on the interior of the Spire, but this high, it was relatively quiet.

Sunny opened his eyes.

He was still alive.

The dome of the Crimson Spire seemed to be broken, letting in beautiful sunshine. The darkness was not as impenetrable now, suffused with that light. Dust particles floated in the air, sparkling like tiny diamonds.

'Sunlight… sunlight?!'

Panicking, Sunny looked around, searching for shelter… but then noticed that his shadow was utterly calm. Unlike before, when his soul was being destroyed by the artificial sun, it wasn't doing anything.

…It did seem a bit confused, though.

'What the hell is going on?!'

Perplexed, Sunny decided to make absolutely sure that the annihilating power of the Terror was gone from the rays of sunshine and dove into the Soul Sea.

What he saw there shocked him so much that he almost let go of the hilt of the Moonlight Shard and fell down.

The entire landscape of the tranquil sea was changed. If before there was nothing but darkness, now, it was filled with blinding white light. The light flowed through Sunny's soul, making the silent waters ripple and swirl.

Up above, the black sphere of the Shadow Core was burning with furious flames. It trembled and seethed, as though overflowing with power. However, that power was being suppressed by the current of light, which prevented it from spreading outward.

Beneath it, there was a massive whirlpool.

Stunned, Sunny stared at the unrecognizable expanse of his soul and didn't know how to react.

'What the hell is this?!'

Full of unease and dark thoughts, he hesitated for a bit and then summoned the runes.

Everything was the same as the last time he had glanced at them, except for one line:

Shadow Fragments: [1000/1000.]

…Not, not everything.

In the cluster of runes describing his Attributes, a few new ones appeared.

Concentrating on them, Sunny held his breath and read:

Attribute: [Soul Conduit.]

Chapter-342: Crimson Terror

[Soul Conduit].

The Attribute had no description, nor was its acquisition announced by the Spell. Staring at the runes for a few more seconds, Sunny cast one last glance at the white void of his Soul Sea and left it.

He had no answers for this mysterious sequence of events, but his intuition was ringing the alarm bell.

He was almost sure that the strange and painful process that began after he had absorbed the last shadow fragment was somehow interrupted. The white light permeating the Soul Sea felt unnatural and wrong, like something external to it rather than natural. The mysterious new Attribute was most likely connected to this external influence instead of to the saturation of the Shadow Core.

In fact, [Soul Conduit] was most likely the manifestation of the radiant force that was currently suppressing the core. In that sense, this Attribute was more akin to the mind hex of the Soul Devourer than to the Blood Weave. It wasn't something that Sunny had achieved or acquired. It was forced upon him, for reasons yet unknown.

Gritting his teeth, Sunny shifted and changed his grip on the handle of the Moonlight Shard. Then, he summoned the Ordinary Rock and immediately dismissed it. Finally, he ordered the shadow to wrap itself around his body, then shift to the ghostly stiletto and back.

...At least the new Attribute did not seem to be directly harmful. Sunny was still in control of his body and mind, as well as having full access to his Memories and Shadow Control. All it seemed to be affecting was the Shadow Core itself, preventing it from… from achieving whatever it was that had failed to happen.

At least for now. But how long would that safety last?

Raising his head, Sunny stared at the pinnacle of the Crimson Spire. Something unexplainable had transpired there, causing this strange turn of events.

Why was he trying to guess if all the answers were most likely waiting for him up above?

To his side, a massive slab of stone had lodged itself between stumps of broken coral roots. More debris piled on top of it at steep angles, forming a twisting path to the distant sunlight.

Pushing himself off the wall of the tower, Sunny glided forward and landed on the inclined stone surface. Then, he lingered for a few moments and began climbing up.

The higher he ascended, the more sunshine surrounded him. Eventually, the whole tower was filled with nothing but stark beams of light and deep, dark shadows. The world was black and white, as though no other color was allowed into this solemn space.

After a while, Sunny approached the broken dome of the Crimson Spire.

There, a vast hall was hidden in the darkness, both its floor and roof now shattered, letting in the brightness of the sun.

With a deep sigh, Sunny reached with his hands and pulled himself into the hall. He was now at the very pinnacle of the Crimson Spire.

In the lair of the Terror of the Forgotten Shore.

***

At the very tip of the ancient tower, there was once a vast and beautiful chamber. It seemed as though it had a large circular opening in its center, allowing sunlight to easily flow into the gargantuan structure at high noon.

Then, however, that opening had become overgrown by crimson coral. And now it was gone.

Due to something that had happened during Changing Star's battle against the Terror, the floor of the chamber partially collapsed, bringing the coral down with it. The ceiling was damaged too, although to a lesser extent.

Through the chasm in the Spire's roof, Sunny could see the boundless white skies and the burning orb of the artificial sun.

Lingering at it for a moment, he then lowered his gaze and looked at the chamber itself.

The first thing he saw was Nephis, who was sitting on the floor, staring into the distance.

Although her state was not as terrifying as on that terrible night when a dweller of the depths had pulled her beneath the waves of the cursed sea, she did not look too good.

The Starlight Legion Armor was practically destroyed, revealing gruesome burns and cuts on her ivory skin. Just like then, white flames were seeping out of them instead of blood.

These fires seemed strangely weak, though, as though on the verge of being extinguished. They were also failing to mend her mangled flesh. Neph's wounds appeared to be healing, but at a very slow pace — a far cry from the miraculous restoration that Sunny had witnessed so many times in the past.

The furious power that had always burned deep within her soul seemed to be finally exhausted. Almost…

Following her gaze, Sunny shuddered when he saw the Terror.

The creature that had created the Forgotten Shore might have looked as a human once, but now, it was like a feverish nightmare.

For some reason, Sunny had expected to see the familiar shape of the nameless goddess, whose statue was created in the likeness of the girl that had been made into the vessel of the artificial sun.

What met him instead was a giant creature whose body was made out of a perverse fusion of crimson coral and mutilated human flesh.

In a sense, it was similar to the crimson golems he had fought at the base of the Spire. It was a twisted approximation of a living being, one that radiated a horrifying sense of madness, wrongness, and loss.

Instead of a human face, the Terror had hundreds of them, all contorted in expressions of blind agony and suffering. Their mouths were open, as though straining to scream. Their eyes were empty wells of pure darkness.

At least now, they were. When the Terror was alive, they must have shone with blinding, annihilating light.

…And it was, unmistakably, dead.

The harrowing creature was sprawled on the floor, its limbs unmoving, its body fractured almost in half. The edges of the terrible wound were burned and melted, leaving no doubt that it was dealt by Changing Star's incandescent silver blade.

'How… how is this possible?'

Stunned, Sunny stared at the vanquished Terror, failing to comprehend what he saw.

How could Neph kill a Fallen Terror? No matter how powerful she was, she was still a Sleeper. Even with the tremendous augmentation of the Dawn Shard, she should not have been capable of slaying something this powerful.

Something was very wrong here.

'This doesn't make sense.'

...But then again, this wouldn't be the first Terror Nephis had slain. Changing Star had killed one in her First Nightmare, too, earning her that name. Still, there was a vast difference between a dormant human killing an Awakened Terror and a Fallen one.

One feat was impossible. The other... the other was simply unthinkable.

Turning to her, Sunny hesitated and then said in disbelief:

"You… you actually killed it."

Neph flinched, as though noticing his presence for the first time. Then, she slowly turned her head and looked at him with empty, lost eyes. Only after a few seconds, a hint of recognition appeared in them.

She remained silent for a while, and then said in a hollow voice:

"...Sunny. You are finally here."

Chapter-343: Soul Conduit

He hesitated for a few moments, not sure how to answer. As seconds passed by, the silence between them grew tense, full of untold meaning.

Finally, Nephis blinked and looked away, staring at the corpse of the Crimson Terror. Her sword hand trembling slightly.

"...Killed it? Yes… I did. Got lucky, I guess…"

After a while, she added in a quiet voice:

"It was just a fake star, in the end."

Sunny smiled slightly, but his eyes remained cold.

"Lucky… I know a thing or two about being lucky, Neph. A creature like this would not have died just because of bad luck."

She remained silent for a bit, then sighed and looked down.

"It was evolving… trying to become a titan. The burden of transformation made it vulnerable. I just happened to attack while the Terror was at its weakest. That's why it died…"

'Evolving… into a titan?'

Noticing a surprised expression on his face, Changing Star grimaced and pointed to the artificial sun.

"Have you not thought about what we have done?"

Sunny looked up, at the radiant sphere of light, and frowned.

In all the chaos, he had indeed forgotten to consider the full scale of what had transpired after the battle, as well as the reasons for and

consequences of it.

Come to think of it… why would the light of the artificial sun destroy the souls of every living creature it touched? It had not been like this before the fall of the ancient civilization, for many generations, at least.

But then, the Vessel had become corrupted and turned into a Nightmare Creature. The Terror. And at the same time, the seals imprisoning the curse of the all-consuming darkness had been destroyed, letting it free.

…So, in fact, the corrupted sun had never existed without the dark sea keeping it company.

Until today.

Sunny had always thought that the sun was restraining the dark sea. Could it be… that it had always been restrained by the darkness, as well?

And when he banished the ancient curse and locked it underground… the sun was finally liberated from its shackles. That's why its light suddenly changed, turning into the annihilating white radiance.

It had become free to do whatever it wanted.

But there was something else…

As his eyes widened, Nephis nodded.

"Yes. The artificial sun does not just illuminate the vicinity of the Crimson Spire. It illuminates the whole of the Forgotten Shore. Its light reaches everywhere. So… as we were fighting our way through the tower… most of the living creatures on the Forgotten Shore had been wiped out.

All that death, all those countless souls… guided into the Spire by the Labyrinth, like a colossal hecatomb, to fuel the evolution of the Crimson Terror."

And Nephis just happened to attack while the Terror was in the

throes of that terrifying transformation. Well… that wasn't a coincidence, most likely. Sunny had not forgotten the thoughtful look on her face as Neph had peered out of the gates of the Spire before giving the Dreamer Army the command to advance.

He shivered, only now realizing that this whole region of the Dream Realm was now almost completely empty of life. Only a few Nightmare Creatures must have survived… those who were lucky enough to hide from the deadly sunlight in time, or were powerful enough to resist it.

Such a boundless influx of souls would indeed be enough to push the Crimson Terror to the next step of its evolution… devolution? Whatever it was that happened to Nightmare Creatures as they grew more powerful. Not that Sunny knew anything about this matters — but if anything could cause something like that, then the evisceration of an entire region of the Dream Realm would certainly do the trick.

Now, however, the Terror was dead, and its corrupting influence was gone, turning the artificial sun back to its normal self.

It couldn't be that easy, though…

As if answering his thoughts, the Spire shuddered again. Another slab of stone broke off from the floor of the chamber and plunged down. Suddenly, the light of the sun grew a little bit dimmer.

Looking up, Sunny noticed that the artificial sun looked not as bright as it had just a few minutes ago. It was as though it was slowly dying.

…Was it dying? There was no vessel to channel soul essence into its furnace anymore, after all.

Interrupting his thoughts, Nephis suddenly spoke, her voice hoarse and tired:

"What happened to the others?"

Sunny shifted and looked down through the chasm in the chamber's floor.

Far below, he could see the vast balcony and the shimmering ring of

the Gateway on it. Somehow, its shine seemed… weaker. The balcony, however, was empty. There were no humans there, and even the coral golems lay unmoving, their semblance of life snuffed out when the Terror died.

"Everyone has escaped."

Neph sighed slowly, as if with relief. After a long pause, she moved slightly and asked:

"What about Caster?"

Sunny glanced at her and shrugged. When he spoke, his voice was cold and indifferent:

"...I killed him."

Changing Star remained silent for a long time. Then, she whispered, seemingly addressing no one:

"So that's why…"

Suddenly, a bitter laugh escaped from her lips.

Nephis raised her hands and pressed them against her face, as if overwhelmed by some deep, dark emotion. After a few seconds, her muffled voice reached his ears:

"You shouldn't have killed him, Sunny…"

Sunny snarled.

"Yeah? Why, exactly?"

She remained motionless for a few seconds, and then slowly lowered her hands and put them on her knees. Her face was pale and bleak.

"Have you checked your Attributes?"

He nodded and looked at her with a curious expression.

"I did. There's a new one there. Soul Conduit."

Changing Star stared into the distance and nodded.

"Yeah. Same for me."

Sunny raised his eyebrow and asked, his voice calm and steady:

"Any idea what it means?"

She did not say anything for a while, and then turned her head to look at him.

"Have you not figured it out?"

He shrugged.

"I was a bit preoccupied. Why? What is it?"

Nephis sighed and looked at the walls of the chamber. Finally, she said:

"This whole tower is a giant soul machine. It was created to collect soul essence and funnel it into the artificial sun. However… it can't function without one small, but crucial gear. A human to serve as the fulcrum of all that power, the conduit for all those souls."

And then, in a much quieter voice, she added:

"...The vessel."

Sunny shuddered, then stared at the corpse of the repulsive creature. The previous vessel of the artificial sun.

Nephis had killed it, destroying a crucial part of the Spire's mechanism… and so, the Spire found it a replacement.

The two of them.

The only two humans left on the Forgotten Shore, conveniently hiding from the obliterating sun inside the ancient tower.

One would be tempted to say that it was fate…

"What does it mean for us, exactly? Are we going to turn into

something… like that thing?"

Neph slowly shook her head.

"...Not yet. Not for a long time. The Terror had absorbed most of the souls it had reaped after the battle, and there's no one to make sacrifices to the sun now. The Labyrinth, too, is now dead."

Echoing her words, the Spire trembled once again, and somewhere down below, a deafening sound of crushing stone could be heard.

Sunny tilted his head.

"So what's the problem? Can't we just… get the hell out of here and never come back?"

Changing Star looked at him, her eyes full of cold, bitter emotion.

"You don't get it, do you?"

After that, she gritted her teeth and said:

"The Crimson Spire is a machine, and the Gateway is a part of that machine. The Spire can't function without a human serving as the Soul Conduit… and neither can the Gateway. There has to be a Vessel inside the tower for the Gateway to work."

She slowly rose to her feet, swayed slightly, and finally pierced him with a dark gaze.

"Which means that only one of us can escape."

Sunny stared at her for a few seconds, then looked down at the distant ring of the Gateway.

Finally, he turned back to Nephis and said:

"I don't suppose you'll stay behind and let me go?"

Changing Star looked at him, her striking grey eyes full of intensity and nascent white flames:

"...I was about to ask you the same."

Sunny lingered for a moment, then grinned.

"Not a chance."

Chapter-344: Sorrow, Pain, and Rage

Slowly walking away from the edge of the chasm, Sunny stopped opposite Nephis and looked at her.

In his dark eyes, there was nothing but coldness.

"Well… it's not like we didn't know for a long time that this would be how things end. Did we?"

She stared at him for a while, then smiled bitterly.

"...We did."

Indeed, they knew.

From that terrible day when Sunny had first understood the meaning behind Cassie's vision, he suspected that one day, in order to survive, he would have to kill Nephis.

This was the truth he had chosen to hide from, even if it meant losing his mind. The final and most unbearable reason for why he had spent months alone in the Dark City, hunting monsters and slowly turning into one of them.

How does one come to terms with the knowledge that, one day, they will have to kill the person they care for the most?

…Knowledge, indeed, was the heaviest thing in the world.

Back at the beginning of it all, far away from the Dark City, before they had even known that the Crimson Spire existed, Cassie had shared with them a terrible vision.

She said:

"At first, I saw a… a boundless darkness locked behind seven seals. Something vast was churning in the darkness. I felt like if I directly saw it, I would lose my mind. As I watched, terrified, the seals broke one after another, until only one remained. And then that seal broke, too."

The first part of her vision described the day when the Vessel of the Artificial Sun had gone mad, and the curse of the all-consuming darkness had escaped the prison created for it by the seven ancient heroes.

"I saw the human castle again. Only this time, it was at night. There was a lonely star burning in the black skies, and under its light, the castle was suddenly consumed by fire, with rivers of blood flowing down its halls. I saw a corpse in a golden armor sitting on a throne; a woman with a bronze spear drowning in a tide of monsters; an archer trying to pierce the falling sky with his arrows."

The lonely star shining in the black skies was Nephis, the herald of ruinous change, who had drowned the halls of the Bright Castle in blood to become its ruler, and then watched as it burned to the ground.

The corpse in the golden armor was Gunlaug, who had died on his white throne, killed by her hand.

The woman with a bronze spear and the desperate archer were Effie and Kai, who had almost perished fighting against the nightmare horde during the siege of the Crimson Spire.

"In the end, I saw a colossal, terrifying crimson spire. At its base, seven severed heads were guarding seven locks. And at the top, a… a dying angel was being consumed by hungry shadows. When I saw the angel bleed, I suddenly felt as though… as though something so precious that it can't be described with words was taken from me."

Seven severed heads guarding seven locks were the heads of the giant statues, who stared at the Star Sigil that Sunny had used to banish the dark sea.

And the last part of the prophecy… it wasn't that hard to understand,

too.

Nephis was the dying angel, the precious thing that was going to be taken from Cassie, and Sunny was the hungry shadow that consumed her.

It was their fate.

"Then, I felt so much sorrow, pain and rage that what little remained of my sanity seemed to disappear. That was when I woke up… I think."

This was the last thing Cassie had said.

…Looking at Nephis, Sunny sighed and turned away.

"I warned you, didn't I? I told you that this story won't have a happy ending. That there will be only sorrow, pain, and rage. Do you remember what you answered me?"

These were the words he said on the day Neph had asked him to join her expedition.

Back then, his suspicion that they would inevitably end up as enemies had already grown, becoming almost a certainty.

Almost… that cursed word. This was the word that had given him hope, no matter how small. Hope that he was wrong.

But despite that hope, Sunny had been preparing for this moment for a long, long time.

It was because he had known that he would have to face Nephis in combat that he had decided to incorporate Saint's methodical style into his technique, why he trained without rest, day and night, not sparing himself from the pain and hardship. If his only skill was one that she herself had taught him, what chance did he have of defeating her?

It was for that reason that he had climbed to the highest point of the Hunter's statue and spent a night alone there, steeling himself for the inevitable future. Forcing himself to accept the terrible truth that,

soon, he would have to kill Nephis.

It was because of this that he had refused Changing Star's offer to heal him. How could he allow her to endure the terrible pain of the white flames, knowing that she would be suffering for the sake of her future killer?

And it was because of this that he had not tried to learn all of her secret plans, remaining comfortable in his role as a hired mercenary. An outsider. He had known that, no matter what, they would end up here, in this moment, forced to fight each other.

Fate… fate was a terrifying enemy to fight against. He knew it better than most.

Fate always won, in the end.

Defeating it was almost impossible.

Shifting slightly, Nephis looked at him and answered, her voice strangely wistful:

"...Life is not a story. It only ends when you die."

Sunny smiled.

"So… are you ready to die?"

As white sparks ignited in the depths of Changing Star's eyes, she answered with another question:

"What about you?"

Instead of answering, Sunny summoned the Midnight Shard and raised it, assuming a battle stance.

Opposite of him, Nephis did the same, her silver sword weaving itself from blinding light.

Of course, neither of them planned to kill the other. They needed the other to remain alive, at least until the victor passed through the Gateway. How long would the loser survive after that, though?

Especially if they were beaten terribly enough to lose the ability to resist further.

Staying behind meant death.

…As the ancient, gargantuan tower quaked around them, balancing on the edge of collapse, Lost from Light and Changing Star prepared to cross their blades.

Chapter-345: Shadows and Light

Sunny and Nephis looked at each other, the air practically crackling with tension at the point where their gazes met.

The white flame seeping from Changing Star's wounds suddenly flashed in a furious outburst, closing some of her wounds and making others seem less severe. After that, however, it grew weak and disappeared, retreating back into the furnace of her soul. As a pained grimace contorted the young woman's face, a dim radiance then slowly shined from beneath her ivory skin.

At the same time, the shadow flowed up and wrapped itself around Sunny's body, making it brim with power and vitality. He inhaled deeply and slightly moved, shifting his weight from one leg to another.

'How… how can it end…'

Before the thought could fully form, Sunny ruthlessly destroyed it and banished it from his mind.

This was the last obstacle on his way back to the real world… and the most deadly. Sunny had fought many terrible creatures in the cursed hell of the Forgotten Shore, but none of them were as fearsome and dangerous as Changing Star. This was going to be his hardest battle yet.

To win it, he had to be absolutely clear, absolutely focused. He couldn't allow himself to feel anything, be distracted by anything.

No doubt, no fear. No regret, no compassion.

Only determination. Only resolve.

Only murderous will to prevail.

As dust particles shined in the beams of white light that fell through the broken roof of the ancient chamber… as stark shadows swelled with dark anticipation… Nephis brought the pommel of her sword to her shoulder.

White flames ignited in her eyes.

And then, suddenly, she lunged forward.

'Fast!'

But not fast enough to not give Sunny enough time to react. Raising the Midnight Shard, he dashed forward to block her furious assault… and shuddered, the force of the impact sending a shock through his entire body.

It felt as though his sword had collided with a mountain.

Their blades got entangled for a moment, and then separated. Almost immediately, the silver longsword lashed out again, appearing from an unexpected direction…. and then again, and again, and again.

Sunny feverishly defended, chaining blocks and deflections into one uninterrupted sequence of swift moves. Despite his best efforts, he reeled slightly after each strike. It was as though he was being hit by a hurricane of adamantine sledgehammers, each hit making his bones tremble and groan.

'How… how is she that strong…'

How was Nephis so strong? How was she so fast? How was she so resilient?

It didn't make sense.

By now, Sunny had fully saturated his core, bringing him to the pinnacle of what a human of his Rank could achieve in terms of physical ability. His power was further doubled by the augmentation of the shadow, making him more akin to one of the Awakened than to a mere Sleeper. No dormant human should have been able to match his power in every regard.

And yet, Changing star did. More than that, she was more powerful than him, tremendously so. She was more like a Nightmare Creature than a human; her movements were fast as lightning, her strength was terrifying, and her technique was flawless, leaving him no chance to exploit even the smallest of mistakes.

…No Sleeper should have been that powerful. It was simply impossible.

And yet, somehow, it wasn't.

'Impossible, impossible…'

Deflecting another blow, Sunny gritted his teeth and dashed to the side, hoping to exploit the momentary opening in his enemy's defense. However, he was met by the ruthless flash of the silver blade instead. The opening was just a ruse, one which almost cost him his hand.

'Something is very wrong here…'

Either the augmentation of the white flame was much more powerful than that of his shadow, or something else was at play. However, Sunny didn't think that the radiance emanating from Neph's skin was stronger than his own physical enhancement.

From what he had observed during her battle against Gunlaug, it was roughly the same or only slightly more forceful — it shouldn't have given her this big of an advantage, especially in its seemingly exhausted state.

Somehow, Nephis had grown much stronger between then and now.

But how?

…At least the silver sword was not burning with the annihilating, incandescent light. If it was, the Midnight Shard might have already been if not destroyed, then at least severely damaged. In that regard, luck was still on Sunny's side.

They exchanged several more blows and disengaged for a fraction of a second, then closed in again. Changing Star's sword shot forward,

missing Sunny's face by a few millimeters… or so he thought before sensing warm drops rolling down his cheek. A thin cut appeared on it, swelling with blood.

Just a little bit to the right, and he would have lost an eye.

Shaken, Sunny deflected the sword away, preventing Nephis from slicing his neck with a reverse cut, and leaned forward in an attempt to ram her with his shoulder.

Changing Star easily sidestepped around Sunny and brought her weapon down, forcing him to block from a disadvantageous position and stagger back.

'Curse it!'

Their violent clash must have looked furious and morbidly beautiful. Both moved with incredible speed and possessed ferocious strength, both were skilled and experienced, forged into formidable killers by hundreds of deadly battles.

One was darkness and shadows, while the other was radiance and light.

But the true combat was happening somewhere else, invisible to the naked eye. This fight was as much about strategy and insight as it was about physical prowess and technique.

After all, to excel as a fighter, one had to master both their body and mind.

Nephis might have been unnaturally fast and strong, but what really made her devastatingly deadly was her own battle genius, her incredible level of understanding of the laws and principles of combat.

Armed with it, she was able to predict what her enemy was going to do even before they themselves knew it. But that was not all. The scariest thing about Nephis was that, through that understanding, she was even able to manipulate and dictate her opponent's actions, turning them into her puppet. She was in absolute control of the flow of combat.

Combat was her domain, just like shadows were his.

But Sunny was not a novice, either. He was a master of manipulation, too.

But more importantly, he had enough insight and knew Nephis well enough to if not deceive her, then at least not allow her to lure him into an inescapable trap.

That was why, for a dozen torturously long seconds, neither of them had been able to seriously wound the other. Even if Sunny was locked into desperate defense and outmatched in every regard, he still managed to hold Changing Star's monstrous onslaught off.

…At least for now.

Finally, the two of them disengaged and stepped back, pausing for a few moments.

Sunny was breathing heavily, his bloodied face turning even more pale than usual. Nephis stared at him with a grim expression, her own breathing laborious and pained.

If this was a cliche drama, at that point, they would have exchanged words, expressing their resolve and determination. Admiring their enemy or humiliating them with disparaging insults, showcasing their fearlessness by making a carefree joke.

…But it was not. Everything that could have been said had been said already. There was no way back.

All that remained was violence.

Looking at Nephis, Sunny suppressed a devious smile.

Something had changed about the proud daughter of the Immortal Flame clan. Something that he had been waiting for from the start of their vicious battle.

The wounds that had been partially closed by the white flame were beginning to seep blood again.

And as they did, the Blood Blossom charm hanging on a thread tied around his neck finally rose from its slumber, filling the Midnight Shard with boundless hunger.

Chapter-346: Promise of Blood

Enhanced by the Blood Blossom, the austere tachi suddenly felt lighter in his hands, full of cold, frightening determination. It was almost as though it had a mind of its own now, a mind focused on one goal: to find the enemy and get a taste of their blood.

'Finally…'

A moment later, Nephis attacked again, her beautiful face cold and indifferent like an alabaster mask. Only the flames in her eyes moved, burning furiously, white as the empty void of the godless heavens above their heads.

Sunny gritted his teeth and moved to meet her. Their blades clashed once again. Just like before, he was shaken by the force of the impact… only now, he had managed to intercept her strike a fraction of a second faster.

It was as though the Midnight Shard was ever so slightly pulling his hand, making it move with a bit more speed, aim a little better, withstand the pressure of the strikes with a subtly less strain.

In the next few seconds, that change had become more apparent.

Before, he had no chance to launch an offense. Changing Star was reveling in her flowing and unpredictable battle style, her every movement oppressive and unpredictable. This unpredictability alone made him wary of committing to an attack.

Of course, Sunny was using the same style. But even though he had mastered it to an admirable degree, his technique was by no means equal to that of Changing Star.

What was worse, she knew it far better than him, so his moves could potentially be predicted with terrifying ease.

The only reason why Sunny was still on his feet was because of the elements of the Saint's grounded style that he had incorporated into his own. Measured and precise, but also capable of explosive counterattacks, it allowed him to both defend against Neph's ruthless assault and restrain her to a certain degree, using the threat of a sudden reversal to keep her from going all out.

More importantly, she was less familiar with that style, which allowed him to diminish the predictability of his movements.

And now, with the help of the Blood Blossom, Sunny was able to resist Nephis more efficiently, even if it was just by a tiny amount.

But the measure of that difference didn't really matter. Because the longer their fight went on and the more she bled, the stronger he would become.

…It wasn't long before he finally managed to land a hit, the tip of his sword scratching against one of her gauntlets.

'This is just a begin…'

However, his thought was instantly interrupted.

'What…'

Nephis suddenly changed her behavior. Perhaps she had sensed the shift in the dynamic between the two of them, or perhaps she was just desperate to end this fight before her powers ran dry and her terrible wounds finally caught up with her.

Or maybe there was some other reason, one that Sunny failed to account for.

But regardless of it, Neph suddenly abandoned her previous calculated attack pattern and instead descended on him in a rain of deadly steel, her defense crumbling and leaving her open to retaliation.

Caught by surprise, Sunny barely had time to shift his stance and block.

The Midnight Shard was thrown down by a violent blow, pressing against his shoulder. The silver longsword slid across its length and scratched against the guard of the tachi, mere centimeters away from Sunny's throat.

For a few heartbeats, the two of them struggled desperately, trying to overpower the enemy. Their bodies were so close that Sunny could feel Neph's breath on his cheek, as well as the heat radiating from her skin.

'Damn it!'

She was just stronger… so much stronger…

Little by little, her sword angled forward, and then bit into his skin, blood flowing on its silver blade. With an angry growl, Sunny let go of the hilt of the Midnight Shard with one hand. His fist shot toward Changing Star's body, the ghostly stiletto appearing in it at the last moment.

But, of course, Nephis had anticipated that. She twisted her torso, allowing the Moonlight Shard to leave a deep but harmless scratch on her breastplate. In doing so, she had to relieve pressure on the tachi, allowing Sunny to push her sword away from his neck.

But before he could jump back, Neph finished her attack by delivering a devastating blow to his head with the pommel of her sword.

Disoriented, Sunny staggered back. He felt blood streaming into his eyes and lost his vision for a moment. Even Shadow Sense was useless, because he simply couldn't differentiate up from down right now.

Suddenly, his heart was full of dread.

'Think, think!'

He had maybe a fraction of a second left before suffering a complete defeat.

'What is she going to do…'

The silver longsword was currently… currently… raised slightly above him after the upward strike. The fastest way to finish the fight would be to bring it down, possibly with its flat on his head, or with its edge on his shoulder, thus severing one of his arms… yes, the second option was the easiest to execute and the most advantageous…

But it was Nephis he was thinking about. What would she do?

Faced with the choice of protecting his head or his shoulder, Sunny instinctively threw the Midnight Shard up to block a vertical blow aimed at his skull. His body moved on its own, following the memory of countless hours of training. Thanks to that, he was able to perform the block even in this stunned state.

His judgment was correct. The tachi collided against Changing Star's sword and was thrown aside. But thanks to that, the strike missed his head completely.

Instead, it fell on his clavicle and bit deep into his flesh, scraping against bone.

Sunny's world exploded with pain.

…But instead of letting it overpower him, he leaned forward and caught Neph's hand in a trap, entangling it with his own.

Then, he drove the Midnight Shard forward and felt it pierce soft flesh.

Nephis shrieked, her voice full of agony and shock. Then, she pushed him away.

Sunny fell to the ground.

'Damn… damn, this hurts…'

Regaining some semblance of control over his mind, he raised a hand and wiped the blood away from his eyes. Then, he rose to his knees and looked in the direction where Nephis had been.

She was standings a few meters away, leaning on her sword for

support. There was a deep gash in her abdomen, just below the lower edge of the fractured breastplate of the Starlight Legion Armor, and a grimace of pain on her face.

Blood was flowing from the wound he had caused her like a crimson stream.

Their eyes met for a moment, and then Sunny lowered his gaze, at the austere tachi that lay on the floor between them.

In all the mayhem, he had lost his sword.

Both of them froze for a second.

Then, ignoring the terrible pain pulsating in his wounded shoulder, Sunny lunged forward and grabbed the hilt of the Midnight Shard.

At the same time, Changing Star rushed forward, raising her sword.

…However, neither of them got a chance to deliver a strike.

Because right at that moment, the Crimson Spire shuddered once again, this time much more terribly than before.

And in a deafening thunder of breaking stone, the floor beneath their feet suddenly shattered and collapsed into the darkness, pulling them down with it.

Chapter-347: Free Fall

Sunny fell down in a rain of broken stone, the floor beneath his feet suddenly crumbling like shattered glass.

The Crimson Spire shuddered and moaned, like a giant creature convulsing in the throes of death. The light of the artificial sun grew dim and weak, causing another tremor to run through the ancient tower, wide cracks appearing on its granite walls.

Sunny had banished the darkness that devoured the Forgotten Shore every night, and Nephis had killed the vessel of the sun that rose above it every day. Together, they had brought destruction to this cursed land. Today was the end of days for the Forgotten Shore, one that the two of them had ushered in.

And one of them was going to have to endure the fallout of this cataclysmic change.

Surrounded by a rain of falling shards of stone, Changing Star twisted and somehow managed to aim her sword in Sunny's direction. Even more miraculously, he managed to intercept it with his own. Both were thrown away from each other, the transparent wings weaving themselves behind their backs.

For a couple of seconds, Sunny felt his body plunging down into the darkness. Then, finally, the Dark Wing fully manifested and turned into a blur, supporting his weight.

Dodging a massive slab of granite that threatened to crush him, Sunny used it as a step and propelled himself through the air. The Midnight Shard flashed, aiming at Changing Star's wings, but was blocked by the blade of the silver longsword.

As the debris fell down, two human figures collided against each other and spun in the air. With nothing to serve as a support, the

only chance they had to exert any force was to use the body of the enemy as one. Their bodies entangled, almost as if they were lovers.

But in reality, of course, the purpose of this intimate closeness was not love; it was violence.

Grabbing Nephis with one hand and using his legs to trap hers, Sunny twisted his torso and delivered a devastating blow with his forehead, feeling the brittle bones of her nose shatter under his strike.

…But at the same time, her armored fist crashed into his side, aimed cruelly at the half-closed wound left behind by Caster.

Sunny screamed.

In the next second, her other fist slammed into his face. Augmented by the weight of the silver sword, that blow caused Sunny to lose himself for a short moment.

When he came to his senses, the first thing he saw was a massive slab of granite falling on them from above. Feeling blood stream down his face and from the newly opened wound on his side, Sunny bent his knee, and then used Neph's body to push himself away.

The two of them flew in opposite directions, narrowly avoiding being crushed by the enormous piece of stone.

Gliding with the help of their enchanted cloaks, Sunny and Nephis circled around each other, moving down in a wide spiral. Both were too preoccupied with dodging the falling pieces of stone to launch another attack, even if they wished to.

Around them, the Crimson Spire was quaking and convulsing, more and more cracks appearing on its walls, whole layers of stone separating from them and plunging down. It felt as though the ancient structure would not be able to hold on for much longer.

Above them, the dying sun was growing weaker with each minute.

…And down below, the runes surrounding the perfect circle of the Gateway were shimmering in the darkness, their light slowly becoming unstable.

Concentrating on the distant balcony, Sunny hesitated for a moment, then threw a glance at Nephis.

Then, he dismissed the Dark Wing and plunged down, abandoning the safety of flight.

Instead, he chose to fall.

With air whistling in his ears, Sunny plummeted through the darkness, approaching the vast balcony with terrible speed.

…Deadly speed.

He had to calculate everything perfectly.

When the Gateway was close enough to discern separate runes shining in a circle around it, he summoned the enchanted cloak again.

As the Memory began to weave itself into existence, Sunny continued to fall, the stone balcony growing closer and closer. A second later, it was already close enough to see the shapes of the dead coral golems in the darkness. A second more, and a bestial fear took hold of his heart… he was about to die, to splatter on the ground like a crushed bug!

Almost at the last moment, the Dark Wing finally came into existence. Immediately, Sunny activated the enchantment and tried to turn his vertical fall into a horizontal glide.

As inertia pulled him down with dreadful speed, he cut a smooth arc in the air and hit the stone surface of the balcony, turning the violent impact into a roll. Then, without losing even a moment, he jumped to his feet and ran toward the Gateway.

Consumed by pain, Sunny limped over the shimmering runes and entered the ring. Almost immediately, a strange feeling overtook him.

It was like… like that strange and indescribable feeling you get a few seconds before realizing that the reality surrounding you is just a dream, and that you are about to wake up.

The light of the runes grew stronger. Simultaneously, Sunny's own body began to glow, emanating the same ethereal light.

…Before that glow had a chance to become bright, though, a shadow fell from above in a deadly rustle of sharp steel.

'No!'

Sunny threw his hands up, deflecting the blow of Changing Star's silver sword. Nephis descended upon him like an avenging angel, the fierce white flames burning in her eyes with frightening intensity.

As soon as her feet touched the stone inside the iron ring, the shimmering runes blinked… and disappeared. Both Conduits were cut off from the Crimson Spire, thus breaking the flow of soul energy. Without it, the Gateway could not function.

Only if one of them was thrown outside would the runes ignite once again.

Sunny gritted his teeth and thrust his sword forward, hoping to get Nephis before she had time to regain her balance. But she was too fast, too cunning; before he could even get close to piercing her flesh, Changing Star was already moving, trapping his blade under her own and throwing it aside.

Sunny rammed into her, throwing all of his weight into one devastating blow. At the same time, he felt cold steel brushing against his ribs, causing more blood to stream down.

The two of them collided with frightening force and fell out of the iron ring of the Gateway, rolling down the steps of the dais. As soon as the first of them crossed the circle of runes, they shimmered and shined once again.

Sunny fell on the cold stones and remained laying there, consumed by pain and exhaustion. A low, tortured moan escaped from his lips.

Something was broken inside of him. He felt weak.

And cold.

He didn't want to stand up.

'I'm not done yet… I'm not…'

Chapter-348: Unbroken

Sunny lay on the ground, gulping air like a dying fish. It felt as though he was drowning.

His body was a map of pain. He couldn't even remember how many injuries he had received… there was the gash in his side left by Caster's jian, the gruesome wound that almost severed his clavicle, the long cut across his ribs… and many smaller ones.

But he was still alive.

He was still able to fight.

He was still not willing to give up.

…All around him, the Crimson Spire was trembling and groaning, slowly starting to collapse.

Gritting his teeth, Sunny tiredly pushed himself off the ground. His body protested, but he forced it into silence and slowly rose to his feet. The blade of the Midnight Shard scraped against the stones as he pulled it up.

Nephis was doing the same.

The young woman stood up and staggered, then regained her balance and grew still. Her posture was slumped, with one hand pressed tightly against the deep wound on her abdomen.

Changing Star looked weak and beaten, her fearsome presence diminished. Her face was pale, bloodied, and grim, contorted by a grimace of suffering. The radiance emanating from her skin was barely noticeable.

…Only her eyes, which burned with dimming white flames, were still

the same — striking, cold, and full of unshakable resolve.

Both of them were washed in the ethereal light of the Gateway.

Looking at Neph through that light, Sunny slowly inhaled and said in a hoarse voice:

"...Let's finish this."

She stared at him for a few moments, then grinned.

Her teeth were painted red by blood.

In the next moment, Nephis raised her sword and dashed forward, sending a cloud of dust into the air with the push of her feet.

They clashed beneath the dais of the Gateway, their swords whistling through the air like hungry fiends. The clangor of steel drowned the thunder of breaking stone, resounding in the darkness of the Crimson Spire once again.

Both Sunny and Nephis were gruesomely wounded, but neither allowed their agony and pain to make them weaker. Instead, they fought with ruthless ferociousness, throwing everything they had left at the enemy, not holding anything back.

Now that Changing Star was bleeding heavily, the Blood Blossom hanging on Sunny's neck entered a state of frenzy. At times, it felt as though his sword moved on its own, helping him strike faster, harder, with deadlier precision.

He had never been as powerful as he was now.

…And yet, it was not enough.

Nephis was still too much for him to handle. She was still too strong, too fast, too overwhelming.

She was more like a monster than a human.

A demon of silver steel wreathed in pale white flames.

Sunny managed to add several deep cuts to her harrowing collection of injuries, but the damage he received in return was twice as terrible. His left arm was slowly growing numb, weakening his grip on the hilt of the Midnight Shard.

His lungs were burning, and it was getting harder and harder to inhale. With each breath, a wet, disturbing sound fell from his lips. His eyes were burning, too, his vision becoming blurry because of all the blood streaming into them. He had to rely on Shadow Sense a lot to make up for this debilitating affliction.

'I can't… I can't go on like this…'

He had to think of something. Something devious and smart, something that would work…

But, for the first time, Sunny's bag of tricks was empty.

No matter how much he thought, he couldn't imagine anything that would defeat Nephis.

She knew him too well. Better than anyone in the entire world.

Two worlds, even…

And yet, Sunny felt that he had no chance of victory if everything continued as it had. He was already just one step away from death.

And so, he did the one thing he could think of.

A desperate gamble with little chance of success.

Summoning all of his remaining strength and resilience, he forced his perception to shift… and started weaving the strange, taxing movements of the incomplete Shadow Dance into his technique.

He allowed his mind to become formless and shapeless, and then aimed it at Changing Star, trying to mimic her incredible battle art to the smallest detail.

And use it as a weapon to destroy her.

After all, if not Neph, then who could he ever imitate?

He was the person who knew her best in the world, too. He was her companion, friend, and pupil.

He was already practically her shadow, her compliant little helper. Caught in the net of her schemes, in her insane, insatiable desire, and incapable of breaking free — not only because there was no other choice, but also because he didn't really… didn't really want to be apart from her.

He knew her flowing, deadly battle style better than anyone except for Nephis herself. After all, he had practiced it as well, spending countless hours to master its foundation and gain insight into its principles. From repeating the same downward slash hundreds of thousands of times to this terrible battle, he had never stopped learning from her.

If he had a chance to make that one final step to mastering the first level of Shadow Dance, it was in a fight against her.

And so Sunny fought, summoning the memory of the beautiful slave girl dancing with her seven shadows. He strained his already failing body to its limit, past the limit, trying to force it to perfectly reflect Changing Star's deadly grace and fearsome elegance.

Put under that strain, his body began to collapse.

Sunny felt as though there was something brittle in the center of his chest, a small part of his body that was slowly cracking under the pressure. With each move he made, a new crack appeared on its surface.

He just hoped that he would make the breakthrough before that small part exploded… if he could endure just a little more, do a little more, understand a little more…

But in the end, he didn't.

After another strange and excruciating move, one that somehow felt different from all the rest, the delicate thing in his chest suddenly shuddered, and broke.

For a moment, Sunny felt as a marionette whose strings had been cut. His eyes widened in horror.

And then, the Midnight Shard shivered slightly.

In the next second, the invisible well of power hidden in his soul opened, and a flood of rejuvenating strength carried his exhaustion away.

Chapter-349: Fate

When something in Sunny's chest shattered, the hidden enchantment of the Midnight Shard, [Unbroken], came into effect and opened the floodgates of power to support him in the desperate, defiant last stand.

…Of course, the Blood Weave was enhanced by it, too, boosting its restorative powers. The virtuous cycle was complete, simultaneously making him much stronger and bringing him away from death's doorstep.

Changing Star's sword whistled through the air, aiming to pierce his flesh… and was thrown aside by the forceful push of the austere tachi. For the first time since the beginning of their brutal fight, Sunny didn't reel because of the violent shock reverberating through his bones.

Now, he had reached the absolute pinnacle of his power potential. With his core fully saturated, the shadow wrapped around his body, the Blood Blossom filling his Memories with frenzied might, and the Unbroken enchantment of the stalwart blade doing the same for his body, Sunny was as strong as he would ever be before becoming an Awakened.

Now, he was finally able to match Nephis…

Almost.

Astoundingly, incredibly, irrationally, she was still stronger.

'How?! How, damn it?!'

Sunny moved and fought, blood seeping from his terrible wounds. Although the gap in power between him and Changing Star had diminished significantly, it was still there, making him miss his

attacks by a fraction of a second, be too late to block and deflect by a hair's breadth.

He was still losing.

As the two of them clashed furiously, sparks of burning metal flying into the air from the point where their swords met, the light of the artificial sun had grown dim and unstable, and the Crimson Spire continued to break apart.

At some point, an enormous piece of granite crashed into the vast balcony, showering them with a rain of sharp splinters. A net of cracks appeared on the stone surface beneath their feet, slowly widening as more debris fell down.

Both of them were thrown to the ground by the shockwave of the collision, but immediately got up, lunging at each other with dark, murderous determination. Sunny dodged the tip of the silver longsword and thrust his tachi forward, leaving a deep cut on Neph's forearm, slicing her muscles apart.

At the same time, she made a step forward and slammed the pommel of her sword into his mauled clavicle, making Sunny's mind explode with pain.

He heard someone scream, their voice hoarse and full of indescribable suffering, then realized a moment later that that bestial voice was his own.

Soon, the scream turned into a growl.

He wasn't done yet. He refused to be defeated, he refused to give up…

He still had a chance to win.

…Because through all of this, Sunny had continued to push himself toward mastering the first step of the Shadow Dance.

Just before something shattered in his chest, thus causing the Midnight Shard to open the well of hidden power, he had sensed an approaching epiphany.

It was already there, at the precipice of his mind. But his body was not strong enough, not malleable enough to manifest it into reality.

Or at least it had not been before receiving the boon of the [Unbroken].

Now, everything changed. Sunny felt that he would be able to make a breakthrough with the help of the powerful enchantment. Every strike, every block, every step brought him closer to finally being able to complete the foundation of his elusive battle art, to bring his vision of it to fruition.

Taking a pained breath, he deflected another vicious attack, hesitated for a split second… and looked away from Nephis.

Instead of watching her body and her movements, he instead gazed at her shadow.

The shadow shifted slightly, facing away from the glowing ring of the Gateway. Its shadow hands moved, raising a shadow sword. The shadow sword fell, aiming to cut the shadow's enemy down.

And suddenly, it felt as though a door opened in his mind.

Everything suddenly fell into place. Everything connected. What was fragmented and obscured before now became clear and whole. It was…

Complete.

Before Neph's sword could reach him, Sunny evaded it with a slight shift and raised the Midnight Shard.

A moment later, he delivered an identical strike, forcing her to retreat.

'...Like that?'

Changing Star was already attacking again, moving with speed and precision that seemed inhuman. Sunny mirrored her movements, and their blades collided in the air, causing a rain of sparks to fly down.

His style changed slightly, growing more graceful. Smooth, flowing. Deadly.

Just like hers.

'No, this is wrong.'

The point of Shadow Dance was not to mirror every movement, to become a literal copy. It was to understand the very essence of the enemy's style and turn it against them.

Sunny scowled and changed his grip on the Midnight Shard slightly, then attacked, manifesting the essence of Changing Star's technique into his own body. Suddenly, he was able to see her intentions with more clarity, understand the pattern of her steps better.

He was able to perform every action she had performed, but also those that she had not used yet. After all, he was not a reflection, but a shadow. He wasn't replicating Changing Star's movements; instead, he was replicating Changing Star herself.

The very heart of her battle technique.

Neph's eyes widened when she felt the sudden change in his style. When they clashed again, Sunny seemed to be able to mirror her every move, throwing the flow of combat into a violent turmoil. His movements were sharper, faster, filled with more meaningful intent.

Her attacks slowed down for a few moments, then grew even more violent and ferocious.

Only now, they seemed to be less measured, less… controlled.

It was as though she had lost her absolute grasp on the cadence of the battle, and was now compensating for it with brute strength.

Sunny suspected that the small advantage he had gained wasn't going to last long. Nephis was too smart and too gifted to allow this lack of understanding to persist. Soon, she was going to see through the guiding principle of his newly established style and adjust to resist it.

Even he couldn't predict what was going to happen then.

That is why, despite his best judgment, Sunny gritted his teeth and escalated his attacks, sacrificing any semblance of defense in the process.

This had to end fast.

...At first, he was able to see Neph's intentions with a considerable measure of clarity, allowing him to react to her attacks slightly before she started to move. When possible, he mirrored her strikes to throw the flow of the battle into chaos. His own came with a tiny delay, lagging behind the enemy by a fraction of a second.

Then, they happened at the same time.

And then, miraculously, his attacks started to come in advance of Changing Star's, even if the difference was barely perceptible.

That was all Sunny needed.

In the terrible crescendo of their merciless duel, blood fell to the cracking stone of the Gateway balcony like crimson rain.

He dashed forward, turning his torso sideways to let the silver longsword miss his chest and rip through his bicep instead. As a blinding wave of pain flooded his mind, Sunny caught Neph's arm with his own.

And then, twisting it, brought his fist on her elbow, shattering it.

As pieces of bloodied bone tore through her skin, Nephis shrieked terribly and made an awkward move, trying to smash him in the head with the flat of her sword. But because it was now only held in one hand, the force and speed of that strike were not as formidable as that of her previous attacks.

Diving under the blade of the silver longsword, Sunny fell to one knee…

And pushed the Midnight Shard forward in a horizontal cut, its blade tearing through Neph's abdomen and exiting in a flood of blood from her back.

Pulled by the inertia of her attack, Nephis made a step forward and came to a sudden stop. As the sword slid from her grip and clattered to the cold stones, she swayed a little.

And then fell heavily to the ground.

The radiance of her skin was slowly fading away.

With his back to her, Sunny stared into the darkness. After a few moments, he closed his eyes and sighed.

'...Over.'

A second or two later, he stood up, turned around, and walked toward the broken figure of the young woman, who was still trying to reach for her sword, blood spilling from her mouth.

As Sunny's shadow fell on Nephis, she gritted her teeth and spat:

"It's… it's not over yet… I still can… I can…"

Ruthlessly throwing the silver longword away with the tip of his boot, Sunny looked at her from above and said in a tired, listless voice:

"You can't. It's over, Neph."

Then, he looked away, at the shining dais of the Gateway. His face was hidden in the shadows.

"You're done."

***

He won.

Looking at the shining Gateway, Sunny tasted that word.

Why was it so bitter? Why was it so painful?

Why wasn't it sweet and joyous?

With a dark grimace, he glanced at Nephis, and then turned away.

What could he say to her that had any meaning? One of them was going to escape this hell, and the other was going to stay. One was victorious, and the other was defeated.

One of them was going to live, and the other was going to die.

Any words he could find would be empty...

But not empty enough to express the hollow sense in his heart.

His feet trembled as he made the first step toward the Gateway.

'...To hell with this!'

Why did his heart have to feel so heavy?! Why wasn't he celebrating?!

He deserved to be saved. He struggled and suffered to get to come this far, enduring countless horrors that would have broken and destroyed anyone else. He bled and fought, clawing his way to this point, never allowing himself to rest or stop growing. He — he! — was the strongest.

He was the last one left standing!

Not the countless Nightmare Creatures of the Forgotten Shore. Not Harus, that damned hunchback. Not Gunlaug, the mighty Bright Lord. Not Caster, the strongest even among other Legacies.

Not even Changing Star, the last daughter of the legendary Immortal Flame clan.

No, it was him. A homeless kid from the outskirt with no place to call his own, someone whom no one had ever expected to survive, let alone thrive in the ruthless embrace of the Nightmare Spell. Whom everyone considered to be below them, an inconsequential nobody with no chance of ever becoming anything else.

Well… he showed them all, had he not?

Gritting his teeth in anger, Sunny made another step.

'To hell with you!'

…Behind him, Nephis had finally abandoned her hopeless attempts to reach her sword. As Sunny walked away, she slowly crawled a few steps, then arduously pushed herself and sat up, leaning on a piece of rubble. The light of the Gateway reflected in her eyes as she watched him go, hunched, seemingly unable to move anymore.

Stepping over a wide crack in the stone that was slowly approaching the shimmering circle of runes, Sunny came to the iron ring.

Now, only one step separated him from freedom.

…But instead of making it, he suddenly froze, looking into the distance with a grim expression on his face.

A second passed by, then another. The Crimson Spire shuddered once again, sending more stone falling down.

As the light of the artificial sun grew so dim that it was almost impossible to see, Sunny swayed a little, then turned around and walked back to Nephis.

Stopping above her, he lingered for a moment, then kneeled, so that their faces were on the same level.

Looking Neph right in the eyes, Sunny raised his hands and clapped several times.

Finally, he said in a terrible, furious voice:

"Congratulations. You almost fooled me…"

Chapter-350: End of the Nightmare

Nephis stared at him tiredly, straining to understand his words.

The radiance was gone from beneath her skin, and instead of it, white flames had once again appeared, licking weakly at her wounds. However, their power was almost gone: instead of healing, all they could do now was stem the bleeding and prevent Changing Star from dying right there and then.

A few seconds later, she opened her mouth, letting blood flow over her lips, and said in a low, barely audible voice:

"What… are you talking about?"

Sunny snarled.

"Drop the act. Your performance was, indeed, masterful. But don't forget who taught you how to lie in the first place. Did you really think that you would be able to deceive me?"

She was silent for a few moments, then whispered:

"I don't… understand."

He looked at her and asked, his voice shaking with anger:

"Why did you do it? Why?"

Nephis blinked and drew in a shaky breath, but didn't say anything, looking at him with pain and confusion.

Realizing that she wasn't going to answer, Sunny spat:

"Why did you throw the fight?!"

She lingered for a moment, then said quietly:

"...I didn't."

A bitter smile appeared on Sunny's lips. Shaking his head, he said:

"You almost made it work, you know. I almost bought it! But after all of it was done and I could think clearly, some things really didn't add up. They didn't make any sense! No matter how I looked at it, something felt wrong."

The Spire swayed, drowning their voices in the sound of breaking stone. Not paying it any attention, Sunny continued:

"First! I know for a fact that you are somehow able to support two augmentations at the same time. You did so while fighting Gunlaug. One to enhance your sword, the other to enhance your body. I rarely forget things, so how could I not remember this? Once you were heavily injured, you summoned back the flames from the sword and were able to simultaneously strengthen yourself and heal those wounds.

And yet, you only used one when fighting me. Funny, isn't it?"

Nephis stared at him, not saying anything. Then, she uttered:

"My powers were exhausted…"

Sunny spat.

"I would have believed that, maybe, if not for your other mistakes. Back at the top of the Spire, you had an opportunity to cut off my arm, ending the fight right there and then. That was the best course of action, the swiftest and most effective attack you could have performed. But instead, you chose a less advantageous method and went for my head, striking with the flat of the blade."

A grim expression appeared on his face.

"Someone else might have made that choice, but not you. Not Changing Star, the sword saint. The only reason for you to pass on that golden opportunity is that you never really wanted to win. Did

you?"

He looked up and grimaced, pain assaulting his mind like a furious sea.

"...And finally, why did you even stay there at the top of the tower, waiting for me to come? If you wanted to escape, you could have gone to the Gateway as soon as you realized what the Soul Conduit was, not even giving me a chance to save myself. But you did not. You just sat there quietly and waited, ignoring your chance to reach the Gateway first. So… why?"

He looked at her and shouted, the pain finally finding its way into his voice:

"Why the hell did you pretend to go all out on me while planning to lose from the start?!"

Nephis stared at him for a while, her face pale and inexorable.

Then, she sighed and looked away.

After a moment, she said quietly:

"Maybe it is because I am far away from home, too."

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Sunny stared at her for a couple of moments, then snarled.

"What? What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

Changing Star turned her head and looked at him calmly, then smiled.

"Alright, Sunny. You caught me. Now go. This tower won't last much longer."

As she said that, the white flames flowing from her wounds suddenly flashed, growing stronger and brighter. Her injuries started to heal once again, not as fast as in the past, but still with considerable speed. Her eyes shined with fearsome radiance.

He gritted his teeth.

"Like hell I will! Not before you give me an answer."

Nephis shrugged tiredly, then looked him in the eyes.

"What it is that you want to know?"

Sunny clenched his fists.

"Why even fight me if you wanted to let me win all along?"

She sighed. As he stared at her with burning intensity, Neph said:

"Isn't it obvious? Because if I didn't, you wouldn't go."

Turning away, she lingered for a moment, and then continued:

"People… people are usually either cruel or kind. But not you. You can be both, depending on the situation. Either ruthless or compassionate. Either cruel or kind. So that's what I did.

I created a situation that would allow you to be ruthless and cruel. To leave me behind without showing any mercy."

Sunny stared at her, his fists trembling.

"But why? Why would you doom yourself to save me? What happened to your goddamned goal?! Didn't you tell me that you will sacrifice anything, anyone, to achieve it?!"

Nephis looked at him and smiled bitterly.

"Why? Are you the only one who is allowed to grow and change? Can't I change too, Sunny?"

She turned away and said tiredly, her voice full of invisible, but crushing weight:

"...Yes. I did say such a thing. But saying and doing are two different things, Sunny. Once it all started… once all those people were dying because of what I have done… once I suffered defeat after defeat… it was more difficult than I could have ever imagined. It was…

distasteful."

He shook his head in shock.

"So… that's it? You just gave up? After all that crap, you just decided that it was too much for you?"

Changing Star remained quiet for a bit, then slowly shook her head.

"...You don't really understand me at all, do you, Sunny?"

Facing him, she grinned.

"Give up? No, I didn't give up. I didn't abandon my goal. I just realized that I was not ambitious enough."

As white flames grew brighter in her eyes, Nephis said:

"I am going to destroy the Spell, and all those who stand in my way. I will accomplish everything that I want. But I will also do it in the way that I want. I will do it in a way that suits my desire, without compromising anything. Without sacrificing my sense of right and wrong."

Illuminated by white radiance, her pale, bloodied face seemed like a face of a demon.

"Manipulating all those people, causing their deaths? I would do it again. I would kill more if I needed to. Because it was fair and right. I gave them the chance to save themselves, or die fighting against the Spell. There is no better way."

For a moment, her eyes were aflame with passion. However, then, her expression suddenly changed. Looking down, Nephis added in a quiet voice:

"...But abandoning you here would be vile, and wrong. It would leave a bad taste in my mouth. Just like leaving a helpless blind girl to die alone would. I won't do it. If I do, I would be no better than those who I want to destroy. What's the point of reaching my goal if, in the process, I become the same as those whom I hate?"

She pierced him with a burning gaze and said:

"No, Sunny. My goal hasn't changed. It's just that reaching it by using a wrong path is worse than not reaching it at all. But why do you care, anyway? Don't you think that it is insane? Don't you think that I am despicable and vile?

So, go! Why are you hesitating?!"

Sunny stared at her, a deep frown appearing on his face. Finally, he asked:

"I'm hesitating because of you, fool. What about you?"

Nephis smiled.

"What about me? Do you think I will die here, in this tower? No. I will… I will be fine. I will escape it and survive, somehow. I'll find another way out.

No matter how long it's going to take me, I will. Nothing will stop me. You know it won't…"

He stared at her for a while, then glanced at the shimmering Gateway.

The crack traveling through the stone balcony was already almost upon the circle of runes, threatening to destroy them.

…Salvation was so close.

He could almost taste it.

Turning away from the dais, Sunny shook his head.

"That is a horrible plan. You want to travel around the Dream Realm battling Nightmare Creatures? Fine. Let's do it together. We can try to go through the Hollow Mountains and reach the human Citadels on the other side. And that's just the south.

We can also try north, east, and west, searching for an unclaimed Gateway. Two of us will have a better chance to survive. The two of

us, together… it's better than being alone. Right?"

She hesitated for a long time, then closed her eyes and slowly shook her head. When she spoke, her voice was wistful and tired:

"...No. I can't. I can't let you stay, Sunny. Go! Go and meet your sister. There's something waiting for you in the real world, at least.

All that's waiting for me is emptiness, bloodshed, and graves. If I return, the same thing that happened in the Bright Castle will repeat itself, over and over again, until there's nothing else. So go while you can."

The runes of the Gateway shimmered, as if on the verge of disappearing.

He gritted his teeth.

"...No."

Nephis opened her eyes and looked at him, a sense of sorrow appearing on her face.

"Leave me, Sunny. Please. Go."

He shook his head stubbornly.

"I don't want to."

Changing Star was silent for a moment, looking at him with a pained expression. And then she said, making his world crumble:

"Go… Lost from Light."

His eyes widened.

Deep within his soul, something moved and rose from slumber, triumphant. Unbreakable, eternal, irresistible. Complete, perfect, and sweet.

…Before Sunny knew what he was doing, his hand shot forward, the ghostly blade of the Moonlight Shard appearing in it.

"Stop."

His hand froze, the tip of the stiletto mere centimeters away from Neph's eye.

Trembling, he looked at his arm and willed it to move forward.

But it didn't. It didn't move at all. It was as though that hand did not belong to him anymore.

As deep horror drowned his heart, Sunny moved his gaze and looked at Nephis, his eyes wide with shock.

"H… how…"

A sad smile appeared on her lips.

"How did I know? …Cassie told me."

Neph sighed and looked away.

"She was the first one to understand the meaning of her vision. She knew that the two of us will end up fighting each other, and that I was going to lose. Maybe even die. She just didn't know how, when, and why. So, Cassie told me your secret, in hopes that it will save my life one day. But I… I hoped that I would never have to use it."

Sunny stared at her, too shocked to say anything. She smiled sadly.

"So, then. I guess… I guess this is goodbye. Ta… I hope that you'll take care of yourself, Sunny. Now, go. Escape before it is too late.'

Even though Sunny didn't do anything, his body moved on its own. Standing up, he turned around and walked toward the shining ring of the Gateway.

Step, step. Another step.

'Stop. Stop!'

But his body would not listen. It just continued to move forward, indifferent to his commands. A dull ache settled somewhere in the

center of his heart.

'Stop!'

There was nothing he could do. He was a miraculous shadow bound to a master; once the master gave a command, he had no choice but to obey.

Sunny slowly walked up the steps of the dais and approached the circle of runes, then crossed the iron ring without slowing down. As soon as he did, the runes shone with intense light.

His body began to glow, too.

So in the end, he did win. Not because he was stronger or a better fighter than Nephis. But simply because his will to survive never wavered, while hers became twisted by doubt.

'No! I refuse!'

The ethereal radiance grew brighter and brighter, until it became hard to discern the human figure in its middle.

'No!'

…And then, suddenly, it disappeared, leaving only emptiness behind.

Sunny was gone, finally free of this long and arduous nightmare. The journey back to reality that had taken him more than a year was now over.

He made it out alive.

Just a few seconds after he disappeared in a flash of light, the crack in the stone reached the circle of runes and broke it.

The shine of the Gateway grew unstable and swiftly faded away.

At the same time, the artificial sun of the Forgotten Shore ignited one last time with a bright, intense explosion of light, and then extinguished.

...Left alone in the collapsing tower and with no more light to shine upon her, the beaten, broken figure of Changing Star disappeared into the shadows.

[End of volume two: Demon of Change.]